POPPY OTT AND THE STUTTERING PARROT

BY LEO EDWARDS

C S Johnson Jr.

POPPY OTT
AND THE STUTTERING PARROT

"IT ISN'T EVERY PARROT THAT HAS TWO SERVANTS TO GIVE IT A BAWTH."

Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot. *Frontispiece*—(*Page* 133)

POPPY OTT
AND THE STUTTERING PARROT

BY

LEO EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF
THE POPPY OTT BOOKS
THE JERRY TODD BOOKS

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To
GLENN

OUR CHATTER-BOX

HAVING written a number of books for boys (this is Leo Edwards speaking), I was glad, of course, when boys and girls began writing in to me about my books. As the number of books increased, so also did the number of letters increase. Picking out the best of these letters, I incorporated them in a "Chatter-Box," which appeared for the first time in my sixteenth book. This new department jumped into immediate popularity. I was to make "Our Chatter-Box" a feature of all of my books, my publisher said. More than that, I was asked to go back through my early books and prepare brief "Chatter-Boxes" for each. So now we have "Chatter-Boxes" in all of my books. I have used a lot of letters—hundreds in fact. So if you have written to me it will pay you to read these "Chatter-Boxes." And how pleased you will be if you *do* find your letter in one of my books. Writers of accepted poems (see some of the dandy poems in my latest books) receive awards. I need a lot of letters for the big "Chatter-Boxes" in my new books. So write to me often, the oftener the better.

LETTERS

TO-DAY," writes Betty Henszey of Oconomowoc, Wis., "I received my Freckled Goldfish membership card. I sure am glad I am a member. Mother saw me hopping around and asked me why I was so happy (she knows that I always hop when I'm happy) and I told her about my membership card and button. My dad said that if it could make him as happy as it made me he would have to join, too. I read the first 'Chatter-Box' in *Poppy Ott and the Tittering Totem* and was much interested in your article on story writing. The other day I went skating and happened to have the *Bob-Tailed Elephant* book with me. My feet got cold so I went in a warming house to get warm. While I was in there I started to read your book aloud and pretty soon everyone

in the place was laughing. It was the part where Red Meyers eloped with the elephant. The funniest part of all was where the poor elephant got the stomach ache. I talk about your books so much at school that nearly all the kids are becoming Poppy Ott and Jerry Todd fans. Whenever I am asked what I would like for Christmas I always say one of your books. My friend Lois always gives me books for presents. But before I get the books she reads them herself. I have nearly the whole set of Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott books."

Later Betty sent for three of our organization booklets, and the Goldfish chapter that she organized is one of the most active in the state.

And here's a letter from a boy's dad:

"I believe my son, Earl Rose, would enjoy being a member of your Freckled Goldfish lodge," writes F. E. Rose of Moorhead, Minn. "In sending the membership card to him mention the fact that his dad paid for it. I just finished reading *Jerry Todd, Pirate*."

Now let us see what another dad wrote to me:

"My boys recently sent you some stamps in connection with your so-called Speckled Goldfish club," writes a parent from Teaneck, N. J. "You sent them a couple of silly cards and some printed matter advertising your books. Now what I would like to say to you is that it is a pretty cheap trick to hold out bait to little boys and get them to send you stamps, so that you cannot only get a mailing list of suckers, but also get the suckers to pay for your printing and also the mailing cost of your advertising. I am surprised that you would stoop to such 'kike' tactics. Please cross my boys' names off your mailing list as I do not want them to have anything to do with such a fake organization as the Speckled Goldfish."

And now, gang, you know what Mr. Teaneck, N. J., thinks of *you*. You're a bunch of suckers; and our Freckled Goldfish organization is a fake. I bet some of you would like to take Mr. Teaneck by the neck and twist some of the "tea" out of it. But cheer up, gang. That's the only letter of its kind that I've received. So don't get excited. Mr. Teaneck is one man in a million. His boys sent me four cents in stamps. For the four cents they got two autographed membership cards; two buttons; two letters of explanation; and two inserts telling about the chapter rituals. They got all that for four cents! And Papa Teaneck says they got gypped.

"I had a good laugh over my membership card," writes Charley Spear of Brooklyn, N. Y. "When I met my chums at school or around the corner I said: 'Look me over, fellows, I'm a Freckled Goldfish.' When they asked what I meant I just gave them a broad mysterious

wink. But I have a special gang that I chum around with a lot and have decided to get up a local chapter. So send me the necessary organization booklets as soon as possible. I am a Leo Edwards fan and I am making my three chums fans, too, by letting them read my books."

"At our club meeting to-day," writes Tom Hanson, Jr., of Sault Ste Marie, Mich., "we organized a yell squad or cheering section. We are also going to get uniforms. We drilled before the meeting. I forgot to say that each member has to take a turn at serving the lunch. To-day was Harold Maltas' turn. His father owns a drug store and soda fountain. He served ice cream and cake. You can imagine what we did to that. I forgot to say we also had milk. I think that was a pretty fair meal because it spoiled my supper. It has to be good to do that! We also had an initiation to-day. It went over swell. I had my dad's nightshirt as a robe, with a red paper hat and red canvas gloves. I sure looked nuts."

The Primos-Secane chapter of the Freckled Goldfish, under the direction of Bill Hopwood of Primos, Pa., certainly knows its stuff. Needing money in the club treasury the chapter went to the Philadelphia Electric Company and "sold" them on the idea of putting on a moving picture show, "King of the Rails" and "Our Gang" comedy. The electric company paid all the expenses and the Goldfish chapter got all the money that was taken in at the door, the tickets selling for ten cents each.

"A member of the Freckled Goldfish lodge, I cleverly lost my membership card," writes William Decker, Jr., of Cynwyd, Pa. "I wonder if you could send me another card, also the booklet telling how to conduct the meetings, how to initiate candidates, etc. Enclosed please find the necessary stamps. My friend and I built a clubhouse in the back of my yard and we intend to use it for our new club's headquarters. It's a peachy clubhouse, having a shingled roof. You can stand up in it and it has two glass windows, one of which is cracked. I might add that recently while we were having a scrap the other window got pushed out, but that's all right."

"I am John Gaszko, member 4860 of the Freckled Goldfish club of Philadelphia, Pa. Having received your club booklets I made up a club. My bedroom is our club Pool. I am Gold Fin. My pal Bob Duffy is Silver Fin. My cousin is Freckled Fin. My mother bought me a victrola, which we keep in our Pool. I have twenty-five members already, and all are Poppy Ott and Jerry Todd fans. The leaders have robes and hats. Whenever I see a picture of a fish I freckle it with my pen and write over it: 'Freckled Goldfish.' At meetings, after the

initiation is over, we play cards and the victrola. We are making up shows. The one we're making up now is called 'Dr. Van Weasly, a mystery play, five cents admission—see the great actors.'"

"I have just finished *Jerry Todd, Pirate*," writes Jack Thompson of Baltimore, Md., "and am starting on the *Bob-Tailed Elephant.* I wish to apply for membership in the Freckled Goldfish club. The boys in my class are all regular Poppy Ott and Jerry Todd fans and we are thinking of getting up a local club. The Ott and Todd books are my treasured books and I never tire of reading them. I have read Appleton, Verne, Dixon and others but I like your books best."

"As a part of the Freckled Goldfish club," writes Frederic Forward of Moline, Ill., "why not give degrees just as in the big lodges? For instance, you could have a 'Mummy' or a 'Juvenile Jupiter Detective' degree. You might prepare a list of questions on your books, taking each in its order. For the 'Mummy' book you could ask: 'Who lost his frat pin?' In the 'Tittering Totem' book: 'What is meant by Tlingit?' For the correct answers to the sets of questions you could confer a degree upon the Goldfish who sent them in. You could send him a little pamphlet telling his duties. By charging a small price for the questionnaire and for the pamphlet you could meet expenses. I'm sure all the Goldfish would be in favor of having this degree. You could take a vote on it by announcing it in 'Our Chatter-Box' and asking readers' opinions. We Moline members would enjoy being a 'Talking Frog' or a 'Stuttering Parrot,' I know. I realize it would make a lot of trouble for you, but I certainly hope you can have degrees. You wouldn't need to give a degree on all your books. I've got it! In 'Our Chatter-Box' print the questions for that or some other book and then have your readers send only for the pamphlet. I am a confirmed 'Ottodd' fan and read all the books of yours I can obtain. I haven't so far read any Andy Blake or Trigger Berg books but I am going to as soon as possible. I imagine that both series are very good, especially the latter. I have ten of your books right now and I hope to get more soon . . . *Jerry Todd and the Wizard's Wand*, by Leo Edwards. What was the old wizard's reason for coming to Tutter? Was it to observe the stars? Was he a real astronomer? Or did he come to steal the— But wait until you've read the book. You'll shiver when you read about the mysterious wand. You'll laugh about Red's and Rory's observatory on the hill on Oak Island. You will be excited by the mystery of the lost planet. Had some creatures from another universe stolen Saturn? Read this thrilling book. Between the

fun and shivers you'll get hysterical. . . . I wrote the foregoing (continues Frederic) to give you a possible idea for a new book. You could have a mysterious old wizard come to Tutter in August and live in a dead magician's house. He told the gang that he was Professor Mercury from the University of Astronomical Observation. He got them interested in stars—so much so that Red and Rory built an 'observatory' on Oak Island. The boys had many troubles and things in building it (Strickers, wild dogs, etc.). Scoop was suspicious of the professor and so the gang watched his actions in the dead magician's house one night. They saw him take a wand from beneath a floor board and pull on each end of it when—presto! —the old man vanished into thin air. Scoop said the wand made the man invisible. The boys thought he was a true wizard. Then there was the stolen planet mystery. Professor Mercury was looking through Red's telescope when he suddenly cried out: 'Saturn has disappeared!' He explained the disappearance by saying that some creatures from another world had taken it. It turned out that the professor was a fakir, after some tricks he thought the magician, who had died, had hidden in the house. The wand was a trick to fool the kids and he did not vanish, but stepped quickly behind a large mirror which, in the dark, resembled a wall of the room. The planet mystery was a fake, too. He did it to excite the boys. The main thing he was after was an imitation skeleton which Scoop and the gang thought was real. They thought it was the dead magician's skeleton. The trick part of it was the fact that it could dance without any apparent connection with the operator. These tricks were given to the dead magician's niece when the 'wizard' was arrested. She sold them to a magical novelty company for a big price."

Wough! How is that for a letter? I may never write such a story as Fred has outlined so thoroughly, but I thought other boys would enjoy reading the long letter just as I received it.

FRECKLED GOLDFISH

OUT of my book, *Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish*, has grown our great Freckled Goldfish lodge, membership in which is open to all boys and girls who are interested in my books. Thousands of readers have joined the club. We have peachy membership cards (designed by Bert Salg, the popular illustrator of my books) and fancy buttons. Also for members who want to organize branch clubs (hundreds are in successful operation, providing boys and girls with added fun) we have printed rituals.

To join (and to be a loyal Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott fan

I think you ought to join), please observe these simple rules:

(1) Write (or print) your name plainly.

(2) Supply your complete printed address.

(3) Give your age.

(4) Enclose two two-cent postage stamps (for card and button).

(5) Address your letter to

Leo Edwards,
Cambridge,
Wisconsin.

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LEO EDWARDS' BOOKS

Here is a complete list of Leo Edwards' published books:

THE TRIGGER BERG SERIES

Trigger Berg and the Treasure Tree
Trigger Berg and His 700 Mouse Traps
Trigger Berg and the Sacred Pig

THE JERRY TODD SERIES

Jerry Todd and the Whispering Mummy
Jerry Todd and the Rose-Colored Cat
Jerry Todd and the Oak Island Treasure
Jerry Todd and the Waltzing Hen
Jerry Todd and the Talking Frog
Jerry Todd and the Purring Egg
Jerry Todd in the Whispering Cave
Jerry Todd, Pirate
Jerry Todd and the Bob-Tailed Elephant
Jerry Todd, Editor-in-Grief

THE POPPY OTT SERIES

Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot
Poppy Ott's Seven-League Stilts
Poppy Ott and the Galloping Snail
Poppy Ott's Pedigreed Pickles
Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish
Poppy Ott and the Tittering Totem
Poppy Ott and the Prancing Pancake

THE ANDY BLAKE SERIES

Andy Blake
Andy Blake's Comet Coaster
Andy Blake's Secret Service
Andy Blake and the Pot of Gold

POPPY OTT AND THE STUTTERING PARROT

CHAPTER I

POPPY OTT

I GUESS you know who I am. My name is Jerry Todd. I have written a lot of books about myself. I'm writing this book, too. But it's mostly about another boy. A new kid. I'll tell you about him.

You see, to start with, I live in Tutter. Our town is the best small town in Illinois. Boy, we have fun! In the summer time, I mean. One reason why we have so much fun, I guess, is because we have a smart leader. Scoop Ellery is the gnat's kunckles, let me tell you, when it comes to thinking up interesting things to do. Peg Shaw is a member of our gang, too. He's a great big guy. To look at him you'd think he was three

years older than Scoop and me. But he isn't. He just grew up faster. His folks fed him a lot of tough beefsteak, I guess. Anway, that's what we tell him in fun. We're all in the same grade at school. Even Red Meyers, who is a sort of runt with freckles parked all over his face and a brick-colored topknot.

Well, to jump into my story, Red and I started out one summer morning right after breakfast to have an early-morning swim in the creek in Happy Hollow. This is a peachy place to swim. The willows growing there make it cool and shady even in the hottest weather. You never saw a place so crammed full of willows. It's a regular jungle. Tramps hang out there in the summer time. But they don't bother us when we go there. We leave them alone and they leave us alone. They know they've got to behave themselves. If they didn't the Tutter marshal would lock them up in the town jail. Sometimes Bill Hadley does lock them up to get rid of them. After a night in jail they're glad enough to get out of town.

Red and I ran into a couple of tramps this morning on our way to the swimming hole. One was a man, a quite oldish man, and the other was a boy our age. Say, I wish you could have

seen the outfit they had! It was a sort of ramshackle bungalow built on a rickety four-wheeled wagon. The house had side windows, all of different shapes and sizes. There was a back door and a little back porch with a rickety railing. Up in front a stovepipe poked its rusted snout through the roof. Like everything else in the outfit the stovepipe was wabbly and ready to fall to pieces. It was some tacky outfit, all right. The wonder to me was that it didn't fall to pieces in traveling the country roads.

An old gray horse was staked out close to the wagon. Talk about a *sway-back!* Say, that old four-legged washboard had a gully in its back as deep as the Illinois River. On the bottom side its stomach bagged worse than the knees of Cap'n Tinkertop's everyday pants. It was awfully proud of its ribs, or so it would seem, for every rib was shoved out in plain sight. The tail was bobbed. To help the old skate switch away the mosquitoes and flies its owner had fastened a frazzled-out rope to the stub. The old nag sure did look funny swishing its rope tail. Red and I had a good laugh to ourselves.

"Some outfit," says my chum, taking in the rickety traveling bungalow and the ten-cent horse.

"That must be the guy who owns it," says I,

pointing to a stoop-shouldered old man who had pottered into sight from the deeper willows.

The newcomer hadn't seen us. And shuffling up to the bungalow, he rapped on a window.

"Poppy," says he. "Poppy Ott. You git up now. Or I'll come in thar with a stick."

Some one inside yawned like a young steam engine.

"Poppy!" says the old man, sharper-like.

"Uh-huh," says a sleepy voice.

"You git up now," says the old man. "You hear me? You hain't took care of Julius Cæsar yet. An' I've got to go to town on business."

Here a tousle-headed kid came into sight on the bungalow's fancy back porch. And at sight of him Red pinched my hand and giggled.

"Lookit, Jerry," says he, pointing. "Huckleberry Finn has come to town."

The kid was a dead-ringer for Huckleberry Finn, all right. His shirt was ripped at the neck and his pants were three sizes too big for him. They hung on him like Charley Chaplin's pants. And did a kid ever have dirtier feet! *Good* night! I wondered what his bed sheets looked like.

"Did you eat, Pa?" says the kid, stretching and yawning.

"Two hours ago," says the old man.

"Leave anything?"

"They's some stuff under the wagon."

While the kid was messing around in a box where food was kept, the old man got out a whisk broom and dusted his clothes. He looked pretty respectable when he got through.

Red got my ear.

"Lookit, Jerry! What's he doing now?"

"Polishing something," says I.

"It's a badge," says Red, sort of breathless-like. "A policeman's badge. Gee! He must be a detective."

"Yah," says I, in a sudden cold feeling toward the old man. "Like old Mr. Arnoldsmith."

If you have read my book, JERRY TODD AND THE WHISPERING MUMMY, you'll remember Mr. Anson Arnoldsmith. The old shyster! He gyped me out of a dollar and a quarter. And ever since then I've been leary about meeting "detectives."

Red was excited.

"I bet he *is* a detective, Jerry."

"I'd sooner think he was a dog catcher," says I.

"I don't see any dogs."

"Maybe he's got 'em in the wagon," I laughed.

"We'll help him, Jerry."

"We'll keep away from him," says I quickly, thinking of old Mr. Arnoldsmith.

"We can detect, too," says Red. "We know how."

"If he's a detective," says I, "he better detect a bar of soap and a scrubbing brush and get busy on his little Poppy."

Red snickered.

"Poppy," says he, speaking the boy's name. "*Some* name."

"They ought to call him squash blossom," says I. "For he looks more like a muddy squash than he does a poppy."

The old man put his polished badge out of sight under his coat.

"Now, Poppy," says he, businesslike, sort of working his shoulders up and down to make his coat fit better, "you jest curry Julius Cæsar, like I tell you, an' brush him down nice an' neat. An' when you git that job done you better git up on the roof with some tar an' see 'bout fixin' that hole whar it rained in on me last night. I've told you before 'bout fixin' it. So git busy now an' do it. Fur it may rain ag'in to-night. An' I hain't a-wantin' to wake up like I did last night an' find my mouth plum full of rain water. You hear me?"

"Yes, Pa," says the kid, over the top of a hunk of bread.

As this was the first boy tramp we had ever seen our curiosity was aroused. It would be fun, we thought, to talk to him and thus get his story. For undoubtedly in traveling here and there he had met with a lot of exciting adventures. So we decided to stick around.

Finishing his breakfast, the kid got out a curry-comb and brush and began massaging the ribs of the four-legged washboard. He kept at this job until his father had pottered out of sight in the direction of town. Then he sat down on a stump and sort of buried his face in his hands.

Red was puzzled in watching the other.

"What's he doing now, Jerry? Crying?"

"Let's go over and find out," says I.

"Aw! . . . He wouldn't want us to catch him crying. He'd be ashamed."

"Maybe he's sick," says I, "and needs attention."

"*You* aren't a doctor."

"I can give him a stomach rub," says I, grinning.

"Yah, and probably *he* can give you a punch in the snout if you get smart with him. He looks tough. You better stay here."

Here the kid lifted his face. We saw then that he hadn't been crying. He had been thinking about something, like a fellow does sometimes when he's troubled. And whatever his thoughts had been they had led him along until he was the maddest kid imaginable.

Getting up from his seat, he jumped up and down in his mad streak, sort of shaking his clenched fists. Say, he acted like he was crazy. We could hear him talking to himself, too. But we couldn't make out what he was saying, for we were too far away.

"What the dickens? . . ." says Red, blinking puzzled-like at the strange-acting one. "What's wrong with him?"

"Maybe he sat down on a hornet," says I.

"Aw! . . ."

"Go over and put a nickel in him," says I, in further nonsense, "and see if he'll play a tune."

"Sh-h-h-h!" says Red. "He'll hear you."

Sort of quieting down, the kid went back to his currying job. We watched him for several minutes, wondering what was next on the program. Pretty soon he put away his currycomb and brush and went over to the bungalow. I figured that he was going to climb on the roof and sling some tar, as his father had ordered him to do. Instead he

thoughtfully walked around and around the wagon, sort of squinting at it and shaking his head. Taking hold of a wheel, he gave it a shake. Golly Ned! The old bungalow rattled in its wabbly joints like the skeleton that Doc Leland donated to the Tutter public school. I *know* how that old skeleton rattles, for one day I fixed some strings to it and the teacher was so scared when it waved its bony hands at her that she almost jumped out of her skin.

Well, we were right-down curious about the strange kid now. He was up to something. We could see that plain enough. So we decided to stick around a while longer.

Going back to where the old nag was staked out in a grassy spot, the kid did something to the horse that made it kick. Bingo! Up went its rope tail and out shot its hind feet like a double-barreled battering ram.

Red grabbed my arm when the young horse tender led his nag over to the wagon and backed it up against a front wheel.

"*Good* night! He's making his old horse kick the wagon to pieces. Lookit, Jerry! There goes the two hind wheels."

The four wagon wheels kicked to pieces, the kid led the horse back to its pasture and then

squatted, contented-like, in the shade of a tree with a book.

"I wonder what got into him," says Red, completely puzzled.

"He's cuckoo," says I.

"Aw! . . . It's only old men who get cuckoo."

"How about yourself?" says I, grinning.

"You aren't funny," says he.

Well, we stuck around. There'd be some excitement, we figured, when the old man came home and found his bungalow squatting on the ground instead of on wheels. As for the kid, he sure had us guessing with his queer actions. We couldn't make him out at all. And curious, too, about the book that he was reading, we crawled closer.

"It's a schoolbook," says Red. "What do you know about that?—*him* studying an arithmetic!"

The kid had paper and a pencil. He was working problems. One problem seemed to stump him. He figured and figured. But he couldn't get the right answer.

Suddenly he looked up and caught our eyes.

"Say," says he, as unconcerned over our presence as you please, "can you kids do fractions?"

We felt foolish in being caught. We hadn't figured on this. We had thought to ourselves that we were too smart to be caught. I had to

"LOOKIT, JERRY! THERE GOES THE WHEELS!"

Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot.

admit to myself now that the kid wasn't as much of a squash as I had let myself believe.

"I can't get this problem," says he, and he dug at his tousled hair with his pencil, looking more puzzled than ever. "It's about a steamboat. Going up stream the steamboat travels sixteen and two-thirds miles per hour. Going down stream it travels twenty-seven and one-half miles per hour. It is three hours and seventeen minutes longer going up stream than down. How far did it go?"

Red and I had had that problem in school. So we got busy and worked it. And now that I was close to the kid I saw what bright, snappy eyes he had. I liked his looks. He interested me. And I kind of forgot about his old clothes and dirty bare feet.

"I suppose you wonder," says he, putting away his arithmetic, "why I made old Julius Cæsar kick the wagon wheels to pieces."

"Did you know we were watching you?" says I, in surprise.

He nodded.

"I saw you kids in the weeds," says he, "when I first got out of bed."

Red and I traded sheepish glances.

"We thought we were hid," says I.

That made the ragged one grin. And in that

moment I liked him better than ever. For he had a good grin. I could see that he would make a swell pal, all right. He was smart, too.

And I had called him a squash! I wanted to kick myself at the thought of it. It was *me* who was the squash.

Then, taking a liking to us, he told us his story. Maybe we thought it was fun, he said, thoughtful-like, to travel around the country like a tramp and skip school and go dirty. But for his part he was sick and tired of the lazy, shiftless life.

"That is what I was thinking about when you saw me on the stump," says he. "I felt pretty blue. Things were getting worse for us. In thinking about it I got mad. And I suddenly made up my mind that I'd stay right here. I wouldn't go a step farther, I said. Pa, of course, would kick on that. *He* would want to keep on going until the old wagon dropped to pieces in the middle of the road. Thinking about the old wagon dropping to pieces sort of put an idea in my head. Why not fix the wagon, says I, so he *couldn't* move it? Then he'd have to stay here and settle down and be somebody, like other men. So I got busy. You saw what I did. . . . Say, can you tell me where I can get a job?"

"How old are you?" says I.

"Fifteen," says he.

I shook my head.

"You've got to be sixteen," says I, "to get a job in this state. I know, for my dad runs a brickyard."

"I'm going to get a job of some kind," says he, determined-like. "For one of us has got to work if we're going to eat."

"Why doesn't your father get a job?" says Red.

The kid laughed at that.

"Pa work!" says he. "That's funny. He's too busy detecting to work."

Red was excited again.

"Is your pa a detective?"

"He thinks he is," says the kid.

"We saw his badge," says Red.

"Yes," says the kid, nodding, "he takes a lot of pride in that tin badge of his. It cost him six dollars. I had a row with him the day he sent for it. I told him that the detective company he was writing to was a fake and all they wanted out of him was his money. But he wouldn't listen to me. And ever since then he's been making a monkey of himself. Some detective, *he* is. Huh! He's my own father, and I suppose I ought to stick up for him, but if he was anybody else's

father I'd say he was an old dumb-bell. When Ma was alive she sort of kept him busy. Still, he didn't do very much work at that. He'd sit around the kitchen reading his old detective books and let her take in family washings. When she died he just quit working altogether. That was two years ago. Look at me! Here I am fifteen years old and I haven't been in the eighth grade yet."

"It wouldn't worry me," says Red, who hates school, "if I never got in the eighth grade or any other grade."

"I thought it was fun at first," says the kid, "to skip school. But I feel different about it now. For I can see that a fellow has got to go to school or be a dumb-bell like Pa. And it's a cinch I don't want to grow up and be like *him*. I guess not. I want to go to school, I do. And I'm going to go to school, too—right here in Tutter. I've made up my mind to that."

I was looking at the flattened wagon wheels.

"What'll your pa say," says I, "when he comes home and sees the wreck?"

The kid shrugged.

"He'll be mad, of course. But I should worry."

"Will he lick you?"

"*Lick* me? Pa? Shucks, he couldn't catch me. Besides," came the easy laugh, "why should he lick *me? I* didn't do it. Old Julius Cæsar did it."

"When's your pa coming back?" says Red.

"Oh, when he gets through sleuthing . . . if he doesn't get locked up in the town jail. He's been in jail three times this summer. That's the kind of a detective *he* is. Probably right now he's crawling along some alley on his hands and knees searching for finger prints, or something like that. He tries to be like the detectives in books. It makes me sick. No wonder the cops lock him up on suspicion."

Red grinned.

"He ought to show the cops his detective badge. Then they wouldn't lock him up."

"That's the trouble," says the kid. "It's his tin badge that gives him away."

"And he isn't a real detective?" says Red, disappointed.

"*Him?* Of course not. But he thinks he is, as I say. And snooping into things that are none of his business is what gets him into trouble."

"We were down this way yesterday," says I, "but you weren't here then."

"We pulled in late last night," says the kid.

"Pa's been crazy to get here. He's been talking about coming here ever since he started working on that black-parrot case."

Red pricked up his ears in new interest.

"Black-parrot case," says he. "What do you mean by that?"

"It wasn't a real parrot," says the kid, "but it could talk like a parrot. And it was coal black. I think it was a mino bird. Yes, that is the name. It came from India. A woman in Cedarburg owned it. Mrs. Casper Strange. And when it was stolen she offered a reward of a thousand dollars for its return."

"A thousand-dollar parrot!" says Red. "I can't believe it."

"Oh, she has oodles of money! A thousand dollars doesn't mean anything to her. We lived in Cedarburg, you know. Pa told her that he was a detective and would get her parrot for her. So she hired him. That is, she told him she would pay him a thousand dollars if he was successful."

I was puzzled.

"But why did your pa come *here?*" says I. "You say he was crazy to get here. Does he think the stolen parrot is in Tutter?"

"Search me," says the kid, shrugging. "All

of a sudden he got a notion to come here, as I say. And here we are."

Red laughed.

"Maybe he came here to search old Cap'n Tinkertop's bird store."

The kid gave the speaker a quick look.

"Old Cap'n Tinkertop," says he.

"He's a friend of ours," says Red. "He runs a parrot store."

A queer look came into the kid's eyes.

"I wonder," says he at length, "if Pa is as dumb in his detective work as I thought. Tinkertop! That was the name of a man who worked for the rich Cedarburg woman."

"It wasn't the Cap'n," says I quickly. "For he's lived in Tutter for years."

"*Ham* Tinkertop," says the kid after a moment. "That was the man's name. He used to be a sailor."

"I know," says Red quickly. "Ham Tinkertop and the Cap'n were brothers. Don't you remember, Jerry?—the brother died and the Cap'n went away to the funeral. And when he came home he had a lot of money. That was when he started up his bird store."

I *did* remember about the Cap'n going away

to his brother's funeral. And at the time of the old man's return I had wondered at his sudden wealth.

"When was it," says the kid, "that this old friend of yours was in Cedarburg to his brother's funeral?"

"The week of my birthday," says Red. "Around the tenth of June."

"That was the week," says the kid, "that the black parrot was stolen."

"I looked at my chum and he looked at me.

"Come on," says I, taking his arm. "Let's snap into it and find Scoop Ellery. He ought to know about this."

CHAPTER II

IN THE PARROT STORE

As I say, old Cap'n Tinkertop had brought home a wad of money from his brother's funeral. The dead sailor had been buried in Cedarburg. The week of the funeral a valuable black parrot had been stolen from a wealthy Cedarburg woman for whom the dead sailor had worked. We had just gotten that story from the Ott kid. And in consequence I now had the troubled suspicion that there might be some unworthy connection between our old friend's sudden wealth and the vanished bird. I couldn't figure it out. But I felt that Scoop Ellery could. For he's smart in solving mysteries. So Red and I turned back into town to find the leader and tell him the story exactly as the Ott kid had told it to us.

"I bet you," says Red, as we jogged along, "that the old man came here on a clew."

"You mean Mr. Ott?" says I.

The other nodded.

"He's shadowing the Cap'n. See?"

I was puzzled.

"But why should the Cap'n steal a parrot at his brother's funeral?"

"That's the mystery."

"And if he did steal it," says I, "where is it?"

"More mystery," says Red.

"Do you think Poppy's father suspects that the Cap'n has the parrot here?"

"Sure thing. He's got a clew, I tell you. That's what brought him here."

The Cap'n's bird store is in a little old building on School Street, which is one of our main business streets. This is the same building where Spider Phelps ran his shooting gallery the winter poor Mrs. Higgins sneezed her false teeth halfway across the Methodist church when they were giving out the Christmas presents. We had helped our old one-legged friend move his shabby furniture and other truck into the rooms in the back part of the store. And we had helped him put up his sign. Here it is:

Cap'n Boaz Tinkertop's

BIRD STORE

Our Parrots are the "Talk" of the Town

Turning into School Street on a dog-trot, our ears were suddenly punctured by one of the screechiest screeches you could imagine. It came from the parrot store. And when we got there, there was Red's aunt, Mrs. Pansy Biggle, standing on a store chair sort of flopping her feet up and down like a dancing duck and jiggling her skirts. Boy, she looked funny. I had to laugh. She's kind of fat. I guess she weighs three hundred pounds. One time she had a husband, but he fell in the river, or something, and they never found him again. She lives at Red's house and runs a down-town store for women. Sells hats and dresses. Her store is just across the street from the Cap'n's store. Last winter she had Micky Gallagher, the one-eyed Tutter carpenter, saw a hunk out of her front door so that she could go in and out in her new fur coat without wedging.

I couldn't imagine what in time was the matter with her. Then I got my eyes on a small white thing skittering around on the floor. And, boy, did I ever laugh! All this fuss over a little white mouse! And a tame mouse at that.

The parrots in the store were screeching like a train of runaway cars on a rusty track. I could hear a shrill chattering sound, too. And when I

looked closer I saw a small monkey hopping around on the floor.

I knew then what had happened. The butcher's pet monkey from next door had gotten into the bird store and had let the white mice out of their cage. And now the monkey was twitching feathers out of the parrots' tails. No wonder the helpless birds were screeching bloody murder!

Well, a lot of people came on the gallop to see who was being murdered. Old Mr. Blighty was one of the first ones there. He thought the store was on fire. And what do you know if he didn't skedaddle to the corner on his rheumatic legs and turn in a fire alarm. Some one else turned in the police call. And pretty soon Bill Hadley, the town marshal, came scooting into sight in his police flivver. The fire truck came, too, rippety-tear, and the firemen ran the hose out and started squirting water into the bird store. That was an awful unlucky thing for Red's aunt. For she got a squirt of water plum in the face. She quit screeching then. She couldn't screech, I guess. Her screecher was clogged with water.

Cap'n Tinkertop was in the back part of his store playing checkers with old Caleb Obed. That's the lazy Cap'n for you! He doesn't take care of his business at all. We've had to run his

store for him ever since he started it. All he does is play checkers and fool away his time. He thinks he is the best checker player in Tutter. And old Caleb has the same conceited opinion of himself. So every day they fight it out in the back part of the store. They were so deep in their game now that they never knew that anything unusual was going on up in front.

The firemen were mad as hops when they learned that there wasn't any fire. Bill Hadley was roaring mad, too. My, but didn't he prance around! I kind of kept out of reach of his club. I didn't want him to get the frisky idea that I had anything to do with the two false alarms.

Scoop and Peg were there. And when the crowd melted away the four of us went into the store to see how much damage had been done. The place was a wreck, all right. The caged parrots looked more like half-drowned cats than birds. Red's aunt looked half-drowned, too. And, boy, was she up on her ear! She's forever laying the law down to Red. He gets blamed for everything. And now she lit into him right.

Scoop sort of took charge of the store, being the leader.

"Is there anything I can do for you to-day, Mrs. Biggle?" says he, wading behind the counter, his

shoes going slosh! slosh! slosh! in the water on the floor.

"I think you've done enough," says the angry milliner, sort of snapping it out like a dog fighting another dog for a bone. She got down from her perch, still glaring at poor Red. "Just look at my dress! It's rooned."

Scoop didn't say anything to that. He just let her talk. So did Red. And pretty soon she calmed down. Her parrot had escaped, she said. That is what had brought her into the store. She had come on the run to ask the Cap'n how to coax the bird back into its cage.

Our leader told her that we would do the parrot-catching act for her. We were the best parrot catchers in the county, he bragged, grinning. And when she had gone he started giving us our orders. We were to get out and scout around, he said. And if we got sight of the parrot we were to report to him.

Before I had a chance to tell the leader about the mystery that Red and I had stumbled into, the old detective himself meandered into the store.

At sight of the newcomer Scoop clutched my arm, excited-like.

"That's him, Jerry," says he in a low voice.

"Do you know him?" says I, surprised.

"This morning I caught him snooping in the store. When I asked him what he wanted he said he was looking around to see if we had any black parrots. I told him that our parrots were all green and yellow. But he hung on. He wanted to get a black parrot, he said. He seemed to think we ought to have one in stock."

"He's a detective," says I.

"What?"

"He's looking for a black parrot that was stolen from a rich woman in Cedarburg," says I.

The leader stared at me for a moment or two. And in watching his face I could see that he was putting something together in his mind.

"Cedarburg," says he. "Why, that's the town where the Cap'n's brother used to live."

"Sure thing," says I, nodding. "And this black parrot that I'm telling you about was stolen the week the Cap'n was there to his brother's funeral."

Speaking quickly and in a low voice, I told the leader about the Ott kid and about the stolen mino bird. While we were talking the old detective pottered out of the store and disappeared in the street.

"Say, who was that old prune, anyway?" says Peg, heaving across the room to where we were.

"He's a detective," says I.

"What do you suppose he asked me for?"

Scoop grinned.

"A black parrot?"

"How did you know?" says Peg.

"Oh, I waited on him this morning."

"We better ring up Bill Hadley," says Peg, naming the marshal, "and have him unlock one of his padded cells and shove this old geezer in. For that's where he belongs. A black parrot! Haw! haw! haw! He'll be asking for a ring-tailed caterpillar next."

Scoop shook his head thoughtful-like.

"The old man isn't cuckoo, Peg. As Jerry says, he's a detective. He's working on a parrot case."

Then we told the big one about the stolen black parrot.

"But there's no black parrot here," says he, looking around the store.

"I'm not so sure of that," says Scoop. There was a queer tone to his voice now, and I watched him curiously as he fished a piece of crumpled paper out of his pocket. "The old man dropped this clipping on the floor when he was here this

morning. It came out of his pocket with his handkerchief. It's an ad out of a newspaper. Read it."

Peg and I hooked the clipping, eager to see it. Here it is:

> FOR SALE: Genuine black parrot. Talker. Address Lock Box 23, Tutter, Illinois.

"Why," says Peg, "that's the Cap'n's post-office box number."

"Exactly," says Scoop.

"Evidently," says I, using my head, "the old detective saw this ad in the newspaper. That is what brought him here."

"It's the clew I told you about," says Red promptly.

"But if the Cap'n has the stolen parrot," says Peg, puzzled, "where is it? And why in Sam Hill did he steal it?"

"The old man's queer," says Scoop, trying to account for the act.

"Queer and tricky both," says I, remembering some things that had happened in the store that were of no particular credit to our old friend, like the time he sold the swearing parrot to the Presbyterian minister and lied about it.

"You're right," says Scoop, nodding. "And if he's up to some kind of trickery in this 'black parrot' deal, we ought to cut in on him and stop him. For we're taking care of him, sort of. And we've got to see that he doesn't do anything crooked."

"If he stole the parrot," says Peg, "*that's* crooked."

"Of course. But *did* he steal it? We don't know that he did. I hope he didn't."

Red had gone to answer the telephone.

"Hey!" says he. "My aunt wants to know if we've seen anything of her parrot yet."

Scoop started for the door.

"Come on, Jerry. You, too, Red. Peg, you stay here and run the store. If old Sherlock Holmes comes in again, pump him. Pump the Cap'n, too, if you can. We'll be back in an hour or so."

CHAPTER III

THE STUTTERING PARROT

We were crazy to begin work on the mystery that had bobbed up in front of us. But we had no chance to do any regular detecting that morning. For we had to scour the town in search of Red's aunt's escaped parrot.

At noon we were ready to give up the search. We were tuckered out. It's no fun, let me tell you, traipsing around in the hot sun for hours at a time. I had a crook in the back of my neck from squinting into treetops.

At the store Peg told us that the milliner had been called into Chicago on sudden important business. She wasn't likely to be back for several days, he said. So we decided to discontinue our parrot hunting for the day. Anyway, as the leader said, the parrot would probably come home of its own accord when it got dark. So why chase our legs off in the hot sun trying to find it?

Peg then told us that the Cap'n and old Caleb

had gone fishing in the Illinois River. So we gave the parrots their usual dinner of boiled corn, after which we did some house-cleaning in the rooms in the back part of the store. We have to do that for the Cap'n. Having a peg-leg, it's hard for him to get around. Anyway, to come right out with the truth, he isn't very particular about keeping his store and living rooms clean. He's right-down lazy.

Red was swishing the broom in the sitting room. Suddenly he gave a yip.

"Lookit!" says he, holding up something in his hand.

Scoop laughed.

"What'd you find?" says he. "A three-dollar bill?"

"A black feather," says Red.

That made the leader jump.

"What's that?" says he, excited.

"It's a parrot feather, too," says Red. "I picked it up on the floor."

"Where there's smoke there's fire," says Peg. "And where there's a black feather there's a feather duster."

"Or a mino bird," says I quickly.

We were sure now that the black parrot, as we called it, was hidden in the store. And deter-

mined to find it, we went through the place from top to bottom. We looked in all the cupboards. We looked in the stuffy attic, too, and in the drygoods boxes in the dark cellar. But we didn't find anything. I could see that Scoop was stumped.

It came supper time and the Cap'n hadn't come home yet. So we fed the parrots some more boiled corn and closed the store for the night. There was an Indian medicine show on the public square. We took it in, stopping at our old friend's store on our way home. But to our surprise he wasn't there.

Scoop had planned to stay all night with the Cap'n to sort of watch for Mrs. Biggle's parrot in case it came to the bird store instead of going back to the millinery store, as it was his idea that our parrots might attract the stray one. And now he begged us to keep him company. It wouldn't be any fun, he said, staying in the store all alone. So I telephoned to Mother, to let her know where I was, then we turned in, two of us sleeping in the old man's bed and the other two on a folding couch in the sitting room.

Red and I had the couch. He's a mean kid to sleep with. He kicks like a mule. About the time you get set in a nice cozy dream he cranks

up his number eights and, bingo! you get a wallop in the slats.

"Cut it out," says I, growling, when he had awakened me for the third time. "What do you think this is?—a pile-driving contest?"

"Jerry," says he in a hollow whisper, sort of hanging to me in the dark, "I heard something."

"So did I," says I. "I heard my slats crack when you rammed your foot into them. Have a heart, kid. I ain't made of cast-iron."

"I heard a voice," says he.

"It was me," says I. "I was warbling canary stuff in my sleep. I get that way from being in the bird business."

"*You* don't stutter," says he.

I sat up then.

"Hey!" says I. "What's that?"

"It was a stuttering voice," says he.

"Probably Scoop and Peg," says I. "They're trying to act funny with us and scare us."

He shimmied around under the covers.

"Say, Jerry," says he in a graveyard voice, "don't you feel scared?"

"Scared?" says I. "What is there to be scared of?"

"I feel that way, kind of. Like something

spooky was going to happen. Gee! Ain't it *dark!*"

"Something *will* happen, all right," says I, "if you don't dry up and let me go to sleep."

"I don't *think* it was a dream," says he, sort of checking up on his thoughts.

"What?" says I, yawning.

"The voice."

"Oh, for the love of mud!"

"It said H-h-ham! H-h-ham!"

"Ham and eggs," says I.

"No, just 'H-h-ham!' Like that. It was a queer voice, too. Like some one choking."

"You're a cheerful guy to sleep with," says I. "Don't you know any stories about ghosts or murders? Let's have a good one—one with a lot of blood in it."

"Jerry, there's something queer about this store."

"Yah," says I, "you're in it."

"About the Cap'n, I mean—putting that ad in the newspaper, and everything. Wonder where he is."

"Fishing," says I, with another yawn.

"Why didn't he come home?"

"Maybe a big bullhead bit his peg-leg off."

"Do you suppose he's really got the stolen parrot here?"

"You'll have a real black eye," says I, "if you don't dry up."

"Maybe," says he, "it was the parrot I heard."

I hooted.

"A stuttering parrot!" says I. "You're good."

Suddenly the other ducked under the covers and tried to wind himself around me like a grapevine.

"*Jerry!* Did you hear it?"

The blamed calf! He had *me* scared, too.

"Hear what?" says I. And the rattle in my back teeth sounded like a Ford on a rocky hill.

"The voice."

I listened.

"H-h-ham!" came a voice in the darkness. "H-h-ham!"

I got a grip on myself.

"I bet it's Scoop and Peg," says I. "I'm going to get up and find out."

"Oh! . . ." shimmied the grapevine, tightening its hold on me. "Don't get up."

But I did. And going into the bedroom, I found my two chums sound asleep.

"H-h-ham!" came the voice again, sort of low and gasping-like. "H-h-ham! C-c-cut out his

"H-H-HAM ! IT'S T-T-TIME TO E-E-EAT !" CAME THE VOICE LOW AND GASPING LIKE.

Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot.

heart and f-f-fry it in butter. It's t-t-time to e-e-eat."

I was right-down scared now. There was something spooky about that stuttering voice. Weird is the word to use, I believe. And giving Scoop and Peg a shake to wake them up, I told them to pile out.

We got a hand lamp. And when the voice came again we traced it to a large picture on the sitting-room wall. It was a picture of the dead sailor. Remember that! We took the picture down. There was a hole in the plastered wall. And in the hole was a coal-black parrot in a wicker cage.

Besides being black all over, like a crow, it was a funny-looking parrot. It was pretty big in its body, with an awfully big curved bill. And it had bleary eyes. That is, as we held the lamp up to the hole the big black bird sort of leered back at us as though it was half full of gin. You know what I mean. And when it talked it weaved back and forth like a drunken man. I began to wonder what kind of a woman this Mrs. Strange was, to bring up a parrot like this! It acted like a barroom parrot to me.

As can be imagined, we were excited in the black parrot's discovery. And gathered around it, our eyes fastened on it, we were kind of depressed,

too, in the knowledge that our old friend was indeed a thief. We could not doubt that now. For here was the stolen parrot in his home.

Peg had been studying the bird with puzzled eyes.

"What do you call it?" says he.

"It's a mino bird," says Red.

The big one grunted.

"It looks like a common old parrot to me."

"Parrots are green and yellow," says Red, acting as though he knew all about it. "And mino birds are *black*. See?"

Peg loves to argue.

"Is a white hen a hen?" says he.

"Of course," says Red.

"And what is a black hen?—a dickey bird?"

"It's a hen," says Red.

"Of course," says Peg. "A hen's a hen whether it's black or white or brown or green. And so is this bird a parrot. The color doesn't make any difference in its name. It's a *black parrot*. Get me?"

"H-h-hello," says the parrot, blinking at us in the lamplight, its head cocked on one side. "H-h-hello, you dirty b-b-bums."

That tickled Red.

"It's looking at you, Peg. It's got *your* number, old hardhead."

Scoop bent down.

"Hi, old shoe polish," says he, grinning.

That set the parrot to laughing. Say, it could laugh just as good as anybody. And it looked funny, too, with its bleary, blinking eyes and cocked head. Pretty soon we were laughing as hard as it was.

We got it an apple. And all the while it was eating the apple it kept blinking at us, sort of, and saying funny things. It was a peachy parrot, all right. We wished we owned it.

"What's your name?" we inquired.

"S-s-solomon."

"King Solomon," says Scoop, bowing.

"S-s-solomon Gu-gu-gu——" says the parrot, stuttering to beat the cars.

"Look out there," says Peg, laughing. "You'll gag yourself to death."

"Gu-gu-gu——" says the parrot. It stopped and turned around three times. "Gu-gu-gu——"

"Here," says Peg, "have another apple."

"Gu-gu-GRUNDY!" says the parrot, sort of screeching out the full name. "S-s-solomon Gu-gu-gu——"

"Never mind," says Peg. "We know you can say it. So don't kill yourself."

That seemed to make the stutterer mad.

"H-h-ham!" it screeched. "H-h-ham! Put 'em in irons."

Here the clock struck twelve. I don't know why it is, but when a clock strikes twelve at night a fellow always thinks of ghosts. At least I do. So you can imagine the scare I got when Red suddenly let out an old gee-whacker of a scream.

"The window!" says he, pointing.

We looked quick. But we were too late to see anything.

"What was it?" says Scoop, getting his voice.

"A man's face."

"Was it the old detective?"

"No-o," says Red, shaking his head. "It wasn't him. First I saw a pair of eyes. Sort of *burning* eyes. Then I saw the full face. It was a man's face. But it wasn't the detective. I'm sure of that."

There was an alley along-side the bird store on the west side. The sitting room had a door and two windows opening into this alley. And it was at one of these windows that Red had seen the mysterious face.

As I say, I was scared stiff. I was kind of

rattled, too. I get that way when I'm scared. But I wasn't so rattled but what I could put two and two together and make four. The spy was after the black parrot. I could see that, all right.

Scoop had tiptoed to the door.

"Listen!" says he, with his ear to the panel.

We could hear some one in the alley. Just outside the door. And suddenly there was a scream. Then we heard something fall.

"Let me in," says a voice.

It was the Ott kid!

"What do you want?" says Scoop.

"My father has been hurt. Help me—*please!*"

When a kid is in trouble, and begs for help, you can't go back on him even if you have to run risks in helping him. So we did what was right and unlocked the door.

Our hand lamp made a puddle of light in the alley. And there in front of the open door lay the old detective. There was blood on his forehead. He looked dead to me. I shivered at sight of him.

CHAPTER IV

OUR NEW CHUM

WELL, there wasn't any more sleep for us *that* night. First of all we got the old detective into the Cap'n's bed. Then we sent a hurry-up call for Doc Leland. But old Doc was out of town. So we had to get busy and take care of the injured man ourselves.

He was talking now. But it wasn't sensible talk. He didn't know what he was saying or what was going on around him. The whack that he had gotten on the head had jammed his brain wheels.

"Pretty birdie," says he, sort of rambling-like, a vacant look in his watery eyes. "Pretty birdie in the treetop."

Having done everything possible for the injured man, Scoop screwed down the wick of the bedroom lamp.

"Now," says he to the patient, "close your eyes and go to sleep. You'll be all hunky-dory in the morning. All you need is a little sleep."

"My haid," says the old man, feeling of his damaged upper story. "It hurts."

"Keep your hands down," says Scoop, taking the pottering hands and putting them down. "You mustn't touch the bandage. For if you do you're liable to start the cut to bleeding again."

"I can hear the birdies," says the old man.

"Of course you can," says Scoop. "There're nice birdies, too. And if you'll lay still and listen to them they'll sing you to sleep."

I was anxious to have a talk with the Ott kid. For I figured he could clear up the mystery of the spying face. So I was glad when Scoop signaled to the kid to follow us into the sitting room.

"Now," says the leader, giving the other one a steady eye, "you can loosen up, if you will, and tell us what you know about this . . . Who did it?"

"I don't know," says the kid.

Scoop scowled.

"Come on, tell us the truth."

"I *am* telling the truth."

There was a moment's silence.

"Jerry and Red tell me," says Scoop, "that you're all right. They say they've made friends with you. But *I* don't know whether we can trust

you or not. It looks to me as though you're covering up something.

"I haven't anything to cover up," says the kid, his eyes seeking the door of his father's bedroom in a troubled way.

"Were you and your father together in the alley?"

"No. He was struck down before I got here."

"But what was he doing here at this time of night?"

"You ought to know."

"Sleuthing?"

"Of course."

"And were *you* sleuthing, too?"

"I followed Pa to town to look out for him," says the kid, flushing at Scoop's sarcasm. "I didn't want him to get locked up. He gave me the slip a block or two from here. Then I heard a scream. I found him in the alley. And that's all I know."

"Wasn't there any one else in the alley when you got here?"

"No."

"And you haven't any idea who hit your father?"

"No."

The kid was telling the truth. I could see that.

The leader could see it, too. And suddenly he shoved out his hand.

"Shake," says he. "If you're a friend of my pals, and they trust you, you're my friend, too."

"Ditto," says Peg, getting in on the hand shaking.

The kid was uneasy.

"Do you suppose," says he, watching the door of his father's room, "that Pa'll be all right in the morning, as you say?"

"Sure thing," says Scoop. "It isn't a bad cut. He got hit with a club, I guess."

"It wouldn't have happened," says the kid, after a moment, "if he had stayed at home tonight as I wanted him to do. But he wouldn't listen to me. He never does."

Scoop's forehead was puckered.

"It puzzles me," says he, "who hit your father, and why."

"Maybe it was the Cap'n," says Peg.

"But why should the Cap'n come here on the sly?" says I. "That doesn't make sense to me."

"He's got a secret, Jerry. You know that."

"Yes," says I, "and he's got a temper, too. And if he had seen us in here he would have made short work of kicking us out."

Scoop got a flashlight.

"We can soon tell if it was the Cap'n," says he.

We followed him outside. I kind of shivered in the darkness. It was heavy. Like a black blanket. The alley looked awfully spooky and risky to me.

We found footprints under the window where Red had seen the spying face. But we found no prints of a peg-leg. So we knew the spy wasn't our queer old friend.

"Whoever it was," says Scoop, "he saw us with the black parrot. There's no doubt about that."

"What?" says the kid, staring. "Is the black parrot *here?*"

"We discovered its hiding place about an hour ago," says Scoop. "The spy saw us feeding it. That was just a minute or two before your father was struck down."

There was a bright look in the kid's eyes.

"I can see what happened," says he. "Pa surprised the man at your window. See? And then the man wheeled with a club."

"I'd know the man," says Red, "if I was to see him again. For he had a mean face. Like a killer."

I shivered.

"For the love of mud!" says I, trying to cut the darkness with my eyes. "Shut up and stay shut.

You give a fellow the creeps. A killer! Br-r-r-r! Let's go inside."

We were pretty well acquainted with the new kid now. And we started calling him Poppy.

"I like that name," says he, "better than my real name."

"What is your real name?" says Scoop.

"I hate to tell you."

"Is it worse than Poppy?"

"*Is* it! Nicholas Carter Sherlock Holmes Ott. How do you like that?"

"*Good* night!" says Scoop. "Who gave you that name?—some half-baked librarian?"

The kid laughed.

"My father named me after his two favorite detective heroes. But just forget about the name. I don't tell it to everybody. Poppy suits me better, as I say. The Cedarburg kids gave me that nickname because I peddled popcorn."

Scoop grinned.

"In *this* gang," says he, joking, "we stand by each other and use each other right. So you've got our promise never to disgrace you in public by calling you by your real name. From now on you're Poppy Ott to us. And we'll just forget that you ever had any other name."

"You tell 'em," says Peg.

"And now," says the leader, "let's get down to business. For, as I see it, we've got a real job ahead of us in solving this parrot mystery. Here's the dope. The Cap'n has a stolen parrot in his house. Maybe *he* stole the parrot; maybe some one else stole it. Anyway, as I say, the parrot is here. But before we turn it over to the law, to be returned to its rightful owner, I'd like to have a day or two to dig into this thing. For instance, who is the spy? What's he after? Is it the black parrot? Does the Cap'n know about the spy? Is that why he has been hiding the parrot? You can see what we're up against. There's a lots bigger mystery here than we thought. And if something *dark* is piling up around the Cap'n—something that is liable to harm him, I mean—and he's innocent, I think we ought to stand by him and help him."

"He's got the stolen parrot," says I. "We know that. So how can he be innocent?"

Scoop nodded, grave-like.

"You're right, Jerry," says he. "It does look as though the Cap'n is behind the stealing. But I'm going to give him a chance to clear himself. And if he *can't* do that . . . well, then, Poppy, we'll let your pa have the parrot. And if the law steps in on the Cap'n to punish him he'll have

to take his medicine. For it isn't my scheme to shield him if he's guilty. Not so you can notice it."

"I'm beginning to feel ashamed of myself," says Poppy, with a gentle look toward the bedroom. "I thought Pa was an old dumb-bell in his detecting. But if he gets this thousand dollars I'll have to admit that he's pretty smart."

"The thousand dollars," says I, glad in the thought, "will set you up in a good home."

"It seems almost too good to be true," says Poppy, his eyes shining. "A thousand dollars! I'm beginning to feel proud of Pa, kind of."

Red laughed in the sudden turn of his thoughts.

"Say," says he, "what did your pa say about the broken wagon wheels?"

"Oh," says Poppy, "he got mad and jawed around. But he shut up when *I* got mad worse. I told him what was what. The old wagon was going to stay right here, I said. I told him if he put any more wheels on it I'd smash *them* to pieces, too."

"You won't have to live in the wagon," says I, "when you get the thousand dollars. For then you can rent a regular house."

"I don't mind living in the wagon," says he. "What I don't like is being a tramp."

Peg laughed.

"We'll help you put a foundation under the wagon and fix it up swell."

"Hot dog!" says I. "That will be fun."

"And we'll put out a sign," says Scoop in nonsense.

PRIVATE DETECTIVE

Whatever your mystery
You'll have it not
If you bring it to
Horatio Calabash Ott.

Poppy couldn't see anything funny in that.

"No," says he, shaking his head. "I don't want you to put out a detective sign. I want Pa to quit his foolish detecting and do something useful."

"But he's making money," says I, thinking of the thousand dollars.

"He hasn't got the money yet," says Poppy. "And even if he does get it I have a hunch that this will be his first and last successful case. Luck was with him this trip."

We had put the black parrot back in its wall hole before unlocking the alley door. And now

we brought the bird out. At sight of it Poppy gave a queer cry.

"I knew it was too good to be true," says he, acting as though the world had dropped from under him.

Scoop caught his breath.

"What do you mean?" says he quickly.

"Pa'll never get a thousand dollars for *that* bird. For it's a real parrot—can't you see? It's a coal-black parrot. It isn't the stolen mino bird at all."

Peg was in his glory.

"What'd I tell you?" says he to Red, acting superior.

Scoop's eyes were fastened on the black bird.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" says he at length. "If this isn't the stolen bird, what bird is it?"

"S-s-solomon Gu-gu-gu——" says the parrot, cocking its funny eyes at us.

"It's trying to tell you who it is," says I, laughing.

"Gu-gu-gu——" says the parrot. Then it whistled. "Gu-gu-GRUNDY. Solomon Gu-gu-GRUNDY. Nice Solomon Gu-gu-GRUNDY. Gu-gu-give me a k-k-kiss."

"Go ahead, Red," says I, "and let it smack you."

"And get a hunk bit out of my nose!" says the freckled one, scowling at me. "What do you take me for?—a pumpkin?"

"K-k-kiss the c-c-cook," says the parrot. "K-k-kiss the cook and t-t-tickle her back with a p-p-poker. When do we e-e-eat? Gu-gu-give me some blood. I k-k-killed him! I k-k-killed him! Gu-gu-give me a bucket of blood. I like blood. Gu-gu-give me a bucket of blood."

Scoop shook his head.

"We're finding out secrets," says he, with a queer laugh. "But I'll be blamed if I know what it's all about."

Peg bent over the leering parrot.

"Say," says he, in a steady voice, "who did you kill, anyway? Tell us."

"H-h-ham," says the parrot, sort of dull and rasping-like. "H-h-ham. I killed H-h-ham. Blood. Gu-gu-give me some blood."

CHAPTER V

OLD CALEB'S QUEER STORY

I'VE got a pretty good head on me. In solving mysteries I can think things out pretty good. Still there are times when my mind goes jumpy. If a mystery takes a sudden surprising turn I get excited. I was that way now.

The stuttering parrot's "blood" talk had befuddled me. Like Scoop, I couldn't make sense of it. And I was disappointed, too, in the thought that now Poppy Ott's father would lose out on the thousand-dollar reward that the Cedarburg woman had offered for the return of her stolen mino bird. I had wanted Mr. Ott to get the thousand dollars so that Poppy could have a good home like the rest of us. But if this bird of the Cap'n wasn't the stolen mino bird—if, instead, it was a real black parrot, as Poppy declared—it was a cinch that the old detective wouldn't be able to turn it in for the big reward.

Our new chum looked sort of crushed.

"Poor Pa," says he. "It'll pretty nearly flatten

him out when he learns that he has been trailing the wrong parrot. It'll be an awful blow to him."

As I say, we didn't go back to bed that night. We were too excited to be sleepy. At daybreak we were still talking about the mystery. Going outside, we searched the alley. But we found no clews.

Mr. Ott got up at six o'clock. He was all right now, only his head ached. At first he was suspicious of us and snapped us up when we tried to quiz him. But Poppy made him understand that we were his friends.

To our disappointment the old man couldn't tell us very much about the spy.

"It was a man, a' average-sized man, an' that's all I know," says he. "I seed him at the windy. He was lookin' inside. I got up behind him to show him my star an' arrest him on suspicion. An' then he turned quick-like an' hit me on the haid with a club."

"Did he say anything to you?" says Scoop.

"No, he jest turned quick an' hit me."

"And you didn't see his face?"

"No."

Nothing was said to the old detective about the stuttering parrot. In planning things Scoop had asked Poppy not to tell his father about the hid-

den parrot until we had had a chance to talk with the Cap'n. For the hidden parrot was the Cap'n's secret. And we had no right to peddle the secret without our old friend's permission.

Breakfast over, Poppy started off with his father, then came back.

"I want to thank you fellows," says he earnestly, "for taking me into your gang. I don't look like much. But you won't be sorry you picked me up, I can tell you that much."

"Can't you take your pa home and come back?" Scoop invited. "You can help us solve the mystery."

"I'm going to look for a job."

Red is a dumb-bell in blurting out things.

"Before you start looking for a job," says he, "you better go home and put on your Sunday clothes."

Poppy's face reddened.

"*These* are my Sunday clothes," says he, looking down at himself. "And they're my Monday clothes and my Tuesday clothes, too."

"I've got a lot of clothes at home," says I quickly. "And if you'll let me, I'll take you home and fix you up. For, as Red says, you'll stand a better chance of getting a good job if you look neat."

"I'll be back," says he.

The Cap'n didn't come home to breakfast. That puzzled us. And then, to our surprise, old Caleb Obed came around for his regular morning checker game.

Scoop stared at the pottering newcomer.

"I thought you and the Cap'n had gone fishing," says he.

"Me?" says old Caleb, cocking his glass eye at us. *"Me* an' the Cap'n, you say? No, sir, it wasn't *me* an' the Cap'n—it was jest the Cap'n, himself."

"He isn't home yet," says Scoop.

"Um . . ." says old Caleb, waggling. "Skeered to come home, he be. That's what's keepin' him away. He's skeered that I'll up an' beat him like I did yesterday. I guess he knows *now* who's the best checker player in this town. I showed him up yesterday, I did. Seven games it was, an' I beat him every one. *He* didn't git a game even."

Scoop winked at us as a signal for us to keep still and let him do the talking.

"Say, Caleb," says he, "do you happen to know what the Cap'n feeds his black parrot for breakfast?"

Old Caleb's jaw dropped.

"Heh?" says he, staring.

"I suppose we ought to take good care of the parrot," says Scoop, "until the old man gets home."

Caleb's face was full of suspicion now.

"How come," says he, with narrowed eyes, "that you-all know 'bout that pesky par'ot? I thought it was a secret."

Scoop grinned.

"Some parrot, isn't it, Caleb? It's the first stuttering parrot I ever saw."

"Yes," says the old man, in a sudden talkative streak, "an' it's the only *black* par'ot in the whole world. Ham Tinkertop could 'a' sold it fur a lot of money, I guess, it bein' a freak. But, no, sir, he wouldn't let it go. He had a reason fur keepin' it. I heerd him talkin' 'bout it to the Cap'n the last time he was here, which was the summer the Cap'n got stuck in the rat hole in his kitchen floor with his peg-leg and had to be sawed out. 'Boaz,' says Ham to his brother, only he didn't say it jest like that, fur you know what a awful stutterer he was, 'Boaz,' says he, 'strange as it may seem to you, knowin' what you do 'bout Solomon Grundy, they hain't a man in the world outside of yourself that I think as much of as I do of that thar par'ot. That's a fact. An' if you'll give him a good hum when I'm daid an' gone, with no ill

feelin' 'gainst him fur what you know 'bout him—only keepin' a sharp eye on him, of course, so he won't do nobody any damage—if you'll do that, Boaz,' says Ham to the Cap'n, with me a-listenin' in, like I say, 'I'll promise to make over my life insurance money to you.' "

Scoop gave us another wink.

"I've often wondered," says he to the talkative one, "how much money the Cap'n brought home from his brother's funeral."

"Two thousand dollars," says old Caleb promptly. "I was with him the day he put the insurance money in the bank."

Scoop laughed.

"Gee! I wish some one would will *me* two thousand dollars for taking care of a parrot. The Cap'n's lucky."

A queer look flashed into the old man's wrinkled face.

"Um. . . . Mebbe the Cap'n's lucky. An' mebbe he ben't."

"What do you mean by that?" says Scoop quickly.

The old man started for the door.

"I come here to play checkers," says he, snappish-like, "an' not to tell secrets." He paused in

the doorway, his beady eyes hidden under shaggy brows. "But let me give you young fellers a pointer," he added. "Don't you git too clost to that thar par'ot. It *acts* all right; an' you *think* it's all right. But it'll nab you in a minute if it gits a chance. An' if that happens you're a-goin' to be sorry, I kin tell you that much."

"Well," says Scoop, when the old gossip had taken himself away, "I guess we know now where the parrot and the money came from."

"And we know why the parrot stutters," says I, thinking of the Cap'n's stuttering brother, who undoubtedly had taught the bird to speak.

"It's a disappointment to me," says Scoop, "that there isn't some connection between this bird and the stolen mino bird. I had hoped for a lot of mystery."

"How about the man at the window?" says I. "*He's* a mystery."

"Sure thing," says Red.

"I wonder who he is," says Scoop, thinking.

"And *I* wonder," says Peg, "what old Caleb meant by that queer talk of his. You could think from his warning that the stuttering parrot was some kind of a peril."

"Maybe the parrot has a bad disease," says I.

"Maybe that is why the Cap'n has been hiding it."

"If it has a harmful disease," says Scoop, "it ought to be killed."

"But the Cap'n was paid two thousand dollars for taking care of it. See? He doesn't dare to kill it."

Suddenly, as though it knew what we were talking about, the black parrot lifted its voice in its wall hole.

"B-b-blood! B-b-blood! Give me some b-b-blood!"

CHAPTER VI

UP THE CREEK

Poppy came along about nine o'clock. And I noticed right away that he had been in the creek. I didn't say anything about it, though. I thought it might not be polite for me to let on to him that I noticed any change in him. But I was glad that he had washed himself. I knew that Mother would like him better now.

Scoop and Red were out parrot hunting. And leaving Peg to run the store, Poppy and I hurried down the street. Pretty soon we came to our house. Mother was baking cookies.

"This is Poppy Ott," says I, introducing my new chum.

"I'm glad to know you, Poppy," says Mother, giving the new acquaintance a warm handshake. "Have a cookie," says she.

"I brought Poppy home with me," says I, "to try some of my old clothes on him."

Mother caught on.

"Fine!" says she, in her usual generous way. "I was wondering the other day what we'd do with that brown corduroy suit of yours. It's perfectly good. And you never wear it."

"Gee!" says Poppy, when we were in my bedroom. "You've got a swell mother."

"And I've got a swell dad, too," says I. "Wait until you meet him."

"Did you say he runs a brickyard?"

I nodded.

"Maybe he'll give Pa a job," says Poppy.

"He hires a lot of men," says I.

"I want Pa to work at something useful," says Poppy, "and quit his silly detecting. I've tried to get him to go to work before, but he wouldn't. But he's got to go to work this time. I've made up my mind to that."

"Here," says I, bringing out the suit that Mother had mentioned, "jump into this and we'll go over to the brickyard and see Dad."

Poppy looked like a million dollars in good clothes. My suit fitted him swell. I gave him a shirt, too, and a necktie and some stockings and shoes. To finish off I slipped him a cap and the price of a haircut.

"You're the best friend I ever had, Jerry," says he, when we came out of the barber shop.

"And we're going to keep on being friends," says I, feeling good in what I had done.

"Forever and ever," says he earnestly.

We met Red on our way to the brickyard. He hadn't seen anything of his aunt's parrot, he said. While we were talking about the escaped parrot a gang of boys our age came into sight from Zulutown, which is the name that the Tutter people have for the tough end of town where Cap'n Tinkertop used to live.

"Step this way, folks," says the gang's smart leader, letting on that he was a showman, "and see Dumb-bell, the red-headed baboon, who picks his teeth with a crowbar and walks a clothesline on his hind legs just like a human bein'."

This wasn't the first time that Bid Stricker and his gang of roughnecks had called our freckled chum a baboon. And I didn't blame poor Red for getting huffy. For a fellow can't help his looks. If he had red hair and freckles he was made that way in heaven.

"Lookit!" says Jimmy Stricker, Bid's mean cousin. "They've got a new kid in the gang. Let's initiate him with a brick."

"Who are they?" says Poppy, getting my eye.

"The Zulutown gang," says I.

"They don't act like friends of yours."

"Friends!" says I, turning up my nose at the smart Alecks. "I should hope not. They hate us because we're smarter than they are. And every chance they get they pick on us."

"Hello, Poppy," says Bid, sneering-like. "We know *you.*"

"The kid tramp!" says Jimmy. "Isn't he cunning in Jerry's old suit."

"Where's your 'Charley Chaplin' pants, trampy?" says Bid.

Poppy turned to me again.

"Do you care," says he, quiet-like, "if I go over there and knock their blocks off?"

"It's five to three," says I.

"You and Red take one apiece," says he, "and I'll take the other three."

The cowardly enemy beat it into Zulutown when we took after them. And putting them out of our thoughts, we separated, Red going in search of Scoop while Poppy and I headed for the brickyard office where Dad was.

It was my Grandfather Todd who started the Tutter Vitrified Brick Company. That was in 1884. When he died the business became Dad's. Some day, I suppose, when I get to using a safety razor three times a week, I'll be a partner in the business. It's going to be fun being a partner

of Dad's. We found my future partner dictating letters to his secretary, Miss Tubbs.

"Howdy, Jerry," says he, acting glad to see me. Then he grinned at Poppy. "Who's your friend?" says he, joking. "Some influential brick buyer?"

I told him who Poppy was.

"He's going to live in Tutter," says I, "and go to school here. And we want to get his father a job in the brickyard."

"Um . . ." says Dad, thinking. "I can't recall any detecting jobs that we have open right now. . . . How old is your father?"

"Sixty-two," says Poppy.

"Too old to push a truck," says Dad, shaking his head. "But if he's dependable I might be able to use him as a night watchman. For Denny Corbin quit me last night. Suppose you send the old gentleman around this afternoon so I can have a talk with him."

When we were in the street Poppy said that things were coming his way fast. He had a home that wasn't on wheels, he said. And he had good clothes and good friends.

"I only hope," says he, "that Pa won't do something silly on his new job and lose it."

"Dad'll be patient with him," says I.

"Your dad's swell, Jerry."

"*Your* dad is going to be swell, too," says I, "when we get through with him."

In that moment Poppy's eyes seemed to see things a thousand miles away.

"I only wish Ma was alive," says he, dreamy-like.

It was on the end of my tongue to tell him that we would get a new ma for him. But I checked myself. He might not like that, I thought. Still, it was a thing to keep in mind, I told myself. I had heard it said by older people that it takes a good wife to keep a man steady. We wanted to keep Mr. Ott steady. And it might be, I told myself, that a new wife was the very thing he needed.

At the store Peg told us that he had had a long-distance telephone call from the Cap'n.

"The old dumb-bell! What do you know if he didn't go to sleep in his fishing boat last night and float down the Illinois River. He woke up down at Oglesby. Now he's rowing back."

I laughed.

"Where did you say he woke up?"

"Down at Oglesby."

"I didn't know that anybody ever woke up down there," says I, in nonsense.

Later on Scoop and Red dragged themselves into the store empty-handed.

"Good-by parrot," says the leader, dropping wearily onto the counter.

Red swabbed his face.

"Let's go swimming," says he. "I'm about melted."

Locking the doors, and posting a notice that the store would be open again at one o'clock, we headed out of town on the Treebury pike, going up the Happy Hollow road past the Scotch cemetery.

"Lookit!" says Scoop, pointing over the cemetery fence. "They're digging a grave."

"What of it?" says I. "Graves don't interest me."

"But they're digging *this* grave in Cap'n Tinkertop's lot."

Red laughed at his thoughts.

"Maybe they're going to bury the Cap'n's wooden leg," says he.

"I'd sooner think," says Scoop, thoughtful-like, "that they were planning to bury the dead sailor."

"But *he* was buried over in Cedarburg," says I.

"They can dig a man up and bury him twice, can't they?"

"You're crazy," says I.

In the time that we were dressing after our swim Peg and Red got into an argument over the escaped parrot. It was fun to listen to them talk. For Red gets hot-headed when he tries to argue.

"What?" says Peg, turning up his nose. "Do you mean to call that ordinary hunk of green feathers that your aunt buys crackers for a *parrot?* Boy, you don't know what a real parrot is. Take Solomon Grundy. Um . . . there's a parrot worth owning, let me tell you."

"My aunt's parrot can lick it," says Red, strutting around like a bantam rooster.

Peg hooted at that.

"Your aunt's parrot!" says he. "Go on! Your aunt hasn't got a parrot. All she's got is an empty bird cage."

"I can catch her parrot," says Red, bragging reckless-like.

"Yah," says Peg, "and you can catch cold, too."

The freckled one was on his high horse now.

"Here's my jackknife," says he, slamming the knife down, "and here's a jaw breaker and here's a shooter and a box of fishhooks. Now, wise guy, I'll bet you the whole caboodle that my parrot can lick your parrot. Put up or shut up."

Peg hooked the piece of candy.

"Um-yum!" says he, smacking.

Red looked silly. He saw now that Peg had been arguing in fun. As for old hefty, he was in his glory. He likes to get Red's goat. And he has learned from experience that the easiest and surest way to tease the smaller one is to argue with him about his stuff or his family's stuff. For Red has the conceited idea that whatever stuff the Meyers family owns is the best stuff of its kind in the world.

Poppy hadn't been with us up the creek. And on our way home we met him in the road.

"I've got something for you," says he, grinning. And what do you know if he didn't pull the lost parrot out of his coat.

"Hot dog!" says Red.

"I found it in the willows," says Poppy.

Taking the parrot, Red fell behind with Peg. We could hear the two of them whispering and giggling together, the best of pals again. Coming into town, Scoop and Peg turned south on Grove Street and Red and I went on alone.

"What's eating you?" says I, when the freckled one kept on giggling.

"Oh," says he, acting big, "Peg and I know something."

And that is all I could get out of him.

CHAPTER VII

FOUR WHEELBARROWS

"JERRY," Mother told me, when I tumbled into the kitchen where she was mashing the potatoes for dinner, "there's a note for you on the Victrola."

"Who from?" says I.

"Mr. Caleb Obed," says she.

I was surprised.

"What's the old man writing to me for?" says I.

"It's about a wheelbarrow," says she.

I got the note. Here it is:

> JERRY: I just got word from Cap'n Tinkertop and he wants you to meet him at the river bridge at two o'clock with a wheelbarrow.
>
> CALEB OBED.

Here Dad came into the kitchen and started fooling around.

"The Cap'n must be on his way home with a boatload of bullheads," says he, when he had read the note.

Mother laughed.

"Maybe," says she, "the old man is tired from his long row and wants Jerry to wheel him home in style."

I was looking at the note.

"We haven't got a wheelbarrow," says I.

"Sure thing we have," says Dad. "Look in the garage behind the old porch screens."

When dinner was over I got the wheelbarrow and started out. It was a mile to the river. And I can't say that I was very crazy over my job. But I didn't back down on account of the hot sun. I didn't want to disappoint the Cap'n. We're good friends and he does things for me. Besides I wanted to find out the truth about the stuttering parrot. And I figured it would help me if I were to get on the good side of him. He would tell me more then.

I couldn't figure out, though, why the old man wanted me to meet him at the river bridge with a wheelbarrow. Certainly it wasn't to bring home a big catch of bullheads, as Dad had said in fun. Could it be, I asked myself, that there was some mystery back of his note?

Red was ahead of me in River Street. I got my eyes on his bow legs. And when I got closer to him I saw in surprise that he was trundling a wheelbarrow like mine.

"It's for the Cap'n," says he, when I overtook him. "He had old Caleb Obed write me a note to meet him at the river bridge."

"Old Caleb wrote me a note, too," says I.

"Good night!" says Red, staring at my wheelbarrow. "The old man must be bringing home a ton of coal."

We had a good sweat in our walk in the hot sun. Coming to the river bridge, we saw old Caleb fishing over the railing. Peg was there, too. And what do you know if our chum didn't have a wheelbarrow as big as Red's and mine put together.

Old Caleb was shaking his shaggy head and talking in a loud voice.

"No," says he, "I didn't write you no note 'bout a wheelbarrow. I don't know what you're talkin' 'bout."

Peg showed how he could scowl.

"How about this?" says he, shoving a piece of paper under the old man's nose. "It's got your name on it."

"Um. . . . Let me see."

"Right there," says Peg, jabbing with his finger.

In the time that the near-sighted one was fumbling around for his spectacles we heard Scoop coming down the river road. He was whistling and stepping it off as big as cuffy.

"Lookit!" says Red, sort of squeaky-like, grabbing my arm and pointing to the newcomer.

"Another wheelbarrow!" says I, going dizzy.

"It's kind of wabbly," says Scoop, when he had joined us, "but it's the only one in our block that I could find." Here his gab trailed away in a sudden discovery. "What in Sam Hill? . . ." says he, blinking. "Four wheelbarrows! Is it an epidemic?"

Here a row of monkey faces was lifted into sight out of the weeds.

"Haw! haw! haw!" says Bid Stricker, jeering-like.

I saw then where the notes had come from. And did I ever feel cheap! To let a dumb-bell like Bid Stricker fool us this way! *Good* night!

We took after the smart Alecks, running them into town. But we couldn't catch them.

Old Caleb was cackling to himself when we came back to the bridge.

"Heh! heh! heh!" says he, shaking all over. "They fooled you slick, didn't they?"

"Wait and see what *they* get," says Scoop, mopping his face and glaring in the direction of town where we could see the enemy kicking up dust in the river road.

"You're goin' to git back at 'em, hey?"

"*Are* we?"

Peg grunted.

"I'd like to punch Bid Stricker in the snout."

"You take Bid," says I, "and I'll take Jimmy."

Scoop laughed.

"Do you know what *I'm* going to do," says he.

"What?" says Peg.

"I'm going to think up a snappy trick to play on them. That'll be more fun than beating them up."

"Hot dog!" says I, looking ahead to fun.

Yes, I was full of giggles. For I knew how smart Scoop was in thinking up tricks. But I guess I would have been full of shivers, instead, if I had known what we were heading into. In the trick that we later prepared for the Strickers I got the worst of it. Br-r-r-r! I don't like to think about it. And to this day I always tremble when I go into a dark cellar. I expect to touch something *cold*.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ESCAPED PARROT

As I say, old Caleb Obed and the Cap'n are pretty thick. What one knows the other knows. They're that way. They jangle like a couple of silly kids in playing checkers. But in other ways they're the closest of friends.

Now old Caleb got the idea in his head that we were neglecting his friend's bird business. And he started jawing at us.

"I might 'a' knowed," says he, scowling at us, "that you b'ys wouldn't tend to business. Here you be traipsin' 'round the country with four wheelbarrows an' the store locked up. When the Cap'n gits home I'm a-goin' to tell him 'bout this."

Scoop got mad.

"Go ahead," says he. "We should worry what you tell him. If he doesn't like the way we run the store he can stay home and run it himself."

"I'm a-goin' back to town," says Old Caleb, pulling in his fishing line. "I hain't a-goin' to

see my ol' friend's business go to pot. No, sir. I'll jest run it myself till he gits home."

"Help yourself," says Scoop. "We don't get anything out of it, anyway. . . . Come on, gang."

"What are we going to do with the wheelbarrows?" says I.

The leader grinned.

"We might have a parade," says he, "and wheel 'em into town."

"Yah," says I, "and have the Strickers hoot at us. Nothin' doin'," and I dumped my wheelbarrow into the weeds.

The other fellows followed my example. Then we set out for town.

Red and Peg, I noticed, had their heads together in more whispered secrets.

"What's eating you guys?" says Scoop, watching the others.

"Ask Red," says Peg.

"Ask Peg," says Red.

The leader got huffy at the gigglers.

"Come on, Jerry," says he, pulling me aside. "We don't have to hang around with them if they don't want us to."

"What's the idea of getting sore at them?" says I, when we were alone.

He gave me a hidden grin.

"I'm not sore," says he. "I'm just letting on. Don't you catch on, Jerry? They're going to have a parrot fight."

"Hot dog!" says I.

"It'll be 'dead dog' for them," says he, laughing, "if the Cap'n comes home and finds black parrot feathers scattered all over his house. For you know the old man's temper."

"There they go," says I, pointing to the gigglers, who had hurried away from us. "They're heading for the store."

"We'll get into the Cap'n's attic," says Scoop, "and watch them through the trapdoor in the sitting-room ceiling. That'll be fun, for they won't know we're there. And when the show is over we'll give them the horselaugh."

The other two stopped in a candy store, so we managed to get ahead of them. At the bird store we went up a fire escape to the flat roof.

"The Cap'n doesn't know it," says Scoop, raising a scuttle, "but last week when he was away to the county fair I lost the front-door key and had to get into the store this way."

The attic that we dropped into was stuffy and dusty. I got cobwebs in my teeth. I hate spiders.

And I shivered in the thought of swallowing one of the nasty things.

Scoop raised the trapdoor in the sitting-room ceiling.

"Here we are," says he.

The parrot heard us.

"Why does it keep calling for Ham?" says Scoop.

"That was the name of its master," says I, thinking of the dead sailor.

"I know that," says Scoop. "But now that the man is dead I should think the bird would forget about him."

"I k-k-killed him!" came from the parrot in a shrill, screechy voice. "I k-k-killed him! B-b-blood! B-b-blood! Gu-gu-give me some b-b-blood!"

Scoop shook his head.

"If *we* only knew what that parrot knows," says he.

"What do you mean?"

"It has a secret, Jerry. This 'blood' talk isn't mere chatter. There's a meaning back of it."

The parrot was still talking when Peg and Red appeared at the alley door.

"Nobody at home," says Peg, coming into the

room below us, "except Solomon Grundy and the parlor lamp."

Red had his aunt's parrot in a shoe box.

"My bird's ready," says he, strutting around, "whenever yours is."

Peg heaved across the room to the hidden wall hole.

"Howdy, King Solomon," says he, taking down the picture that hid the hole.

The parrot bristled in its cage.

"Gu-gu-git out, you dirty b-b-bums."

The big one laughed.

"Hey!" says he. "Don't you talk that way to me, you hunk of petrified ink, or I'll bite your cupola off."

"H-h-ham!" says the parrot, screechy-like. "R-r-rattle their skulls, H-h-ham. R-r-rattle their skulls."

This brought the other parrot to life.

"Breakfast," came a thin voice from the shoe box. "Polly wants breakfast."

Peg laughed.

"Polly will want a casket pretty quick," says he.

"Don't kid yourself," says Red, sleuthing the table edge for a wad of chewing gum that he had parked there earlier in the day.

"Your parrot sounds like a hunk of cake," says Peg.

"Cake with rat poison in it," says Red.

"Poor Polly!" says Peg. "You better take a last fond look at your bird, Red. For it's heading into sudden death."

"You can't scare me. Bring on your old feather duster, you big bluffer. I'll show *you*."

"How are we going to work it?" says Peg, squinting at the bristling black parrot with a calculating eye.

"Search me," says Red. "This is my first parrot fight."

"We might put 'em in the Cap'n's churn and crank it up."

"Let's put 'em in a big cage," says Red. "Then we won't get clawed."

Peg skidded into the store and came back with a cage.

"I'll put my bird in first," says Red.

Old Solomon Grundy was boiling mad now. *He* knew there was crooked work going on!

"Golly Ned!" says Peg, jumping back to save his fingers. "Did you see him slap his tin shears at me?"

Red purred.

"Talk to him," says he. "Be gentle."

The big one tried it again.

"Hold 'er, Newt," says Red. "She's a-rearin'."

"I pretty nearly lost an elbow that time," says Peg.

"Can't we hold the cage doors together?" says Red. "Then we can make old Solomon get into the big cage. See?"

Peg shimmied around.

"I've got it," says he. "Now, git a broom and poke around in the small cage."

Red gave a swat with the broom, shoving Peg in the face.

"For the love of mud!" says the big one, spitting up broom straws. "What do you think you're doing?—shooting pool?"

"The broom slipped," says Red, trying to keep his face straight.

"My right arm'll slip," says Peg, "if you don't back up. *Good* night! You sure are dumb. Look where you're shoving after this."

"I did look," says Red, "but you moved."

They fooled around for several minutes, Peg with the cage and the other one with the broom. But let me tell you they didn't put anything over on Solomon Grundy!

"Now!" says Peg, shoving the cages together.

Red jabbed with the broom. He jabbed so

hard he knocked the cage out of Peg's hands. Solomon Grundy was loose in the room now. And was there *action!* Boy, if I live to be a hundred and fifty years old I never expect to see anybody move any faster than those parrot fighters did. Around and around the room they went, ducking and dodging the furious fighting bird. Sliding for base, sort of, Red managed to get under the sofa. In the same time Peg got into the bedroom.

Here the alley door opened.

"Um . . . I kin see Donald Meyers under the sofy," says the newcomer in a cackling voice. "What you doin' under thar, Donald? Be you hidin' on the Cap'n?"

Before Red could answer there was a strangling scream.

"Murder!" says Scoop, dropping down through the trapdoor. "Come on, Jerry."

Peg came running from the bedroom just as I landed kerflop! in the middle of the sitting-room floor.

"Who screamed?" says he.

"Old Caleb Obed," says I.

Red crawled out of his hiding place. His eyes were as big as saucers.

"I saw him," says he. "Solomon Grundy flew at him and he let out a screech and beat it."

Scoop was in the alley now. We could see him crawling along on his hands and knees. He was trying to capture something with his cap.

"H-h-ham!" says a familiar rasping voice.

I gave a cry.

"It's Solomon Grundy!"

Too quick for the leader, the stuttering parrot flopped its funeral-like wings and disappeared over the roof of Red's aunt's millinery store on the opposite side of the street.

CHAPTER IX

VOODOOISM

Red and Peg were in a pickle. There was no doubt about that. Their parrot fight having ended in the escape of the black parrot—the mystery parrot, as we now called it—they knew that the Cap'n would go for them when he found out what they had done.

Scoop and I hadn't been asked in on the others' fun. In fact the parrot fighters had acted kind of smart with us. So now we paid them back by telling them that the black parrot's escape was their funeral and not ours.

Still, we wouldn't go back on them, we said, having fun with them in their predicament. If they ended up in the town jail we would call on them, brotherly-like, and keep them in peanuts and chewing gum.

Wanting to save his hide, Red said he guessed he would hike into the country and visit his relatives for a spell.

"My Uncle Charley keeps cows," says he, "and I can help him milk them. So he'll be glad to have me around."

Scoop hooted.

"*You* milk a cow!" says he. "You'll be telling us next that you know how to husk pumpkins."

"If a cow stepped on you," says I to the guilty one, "it would be worse than going to jail."

"Stop talking about jail," says he, shivering. "You give me the jimjams."

Scoop waggled serious-like.

"I wonder if it's true," says he, "that Bill Hadley feeds his prisoners on bread and water."

"Absolutely," says I.

"I can't swallow it, though," says Scoop, "that Bill really mixes the bread and water in the cat's dish."

"I've seen the dish," says I.

This kind of crazy talk didn't scare Peg like it did poor Red. But just the same old hefty was worried in the thought of what he had done. He realized that he was in a serious predicament.

Then Scoop put his wits to work in the others' behalf. The scheme that he suggested was a darb, all right. But Red held off.

"Gosh!" says he, more worried than ever. "What'll my aunt say?"

"She won't know anything about it," says Scoop. "For she's in Chicago, you say."

"But why use *my* parrot?" says Red. "Why don't you use one of the store parrots?"

"They aren't big enough," says Scoop. "Yours is the only one in the store Solomon Grundy's size."

Red shrugged.

"All right," says he, giving in. "I'll take a chance. But, boy, I can see my finish if I get caught. You don't know my aunt! She's a rip-snorter, let me tell you."

It was the leader's scheme to blacken Red's green parrot with soot and put it in the escaped parrot's cage. That would give us a chance to capture the missing parrot without having an empty cage in the wall hole to give us away. Later on we would switch the real black parrot for the sooted parrot. The Cap'n never would be the wiser. He wouldn't know that his black parrot had been out of the house. Thus his temper would be saved and our two chums would escape trouble.

I was given the job of putting the sitting room in order. And in returning the Cap'n's dead brother's picture to its wall hook I noticed something about the enlargement that had escaped

me in the other times that I had handled the picture.

In the tattooing on the dead sailor's bare chest was a black parrot. It was the only thing pricked into the skin in black ink. All around it were colored designs—anchors and flowers and moons and things like that.

While I stood there staring at the unusual picture, my thoughts bobbing around in my head, Scoop yipped to me to come into the kitchen and see the fun.

I found him rubbing soot from the stove into Red's parrot's green feathers.

"Solomon Grundy, Jr.," says he, laughing.

The parrot eyed us reproachful-like in its smudgy disgrace.

"Breakfast," it whimpered. "Polly wants breakfast."

"What'll you have for breakfast this morning?" says Peg, in fun. "Some fried fishhooks or some boiled shoe buttons?"

"Breakfast," says the parrot again. "Polly wants breakfast."

I drew the leader into the sitting room.

"I've made a discovery," says I.

"So did Christopher Columbus," says he, grinning.

"Lookit!" says I, taking him up to the dead sailor's picture.

"A black parrot!" says he, following my finger.

"I bet you there's a connection between this picture and the real parrot," says I. "For this man owned the mystery parrot. He was a sailor. And you know how many secrets a sailor has."

"Maybe he was a pirate," says Scoop, letting his imagination jump along. "The pirate ship was called the *Black Parrot.* See? And all the pirates had this black-parrot symbol tattooed on them."

"And the real black parrot," says I, "was the ship mascot. Just like the cook's parrot in *Treasure Island.*"

The leader laughed.

"Jerry," says he, "we're a crazy pair. We've got too much imagination."

"Just the same," says I, hanging on, "I bet you there *is* a secret to the tattooed parrot. You wait and see."

We had planned to turn the store over to old Caleb when he came around. That would give us a chance to go parrot hunting. But to our surprise the old man didn't come back.

So we put Peg in charge of the store. Then the rest of us started out, each one taking a dif-

ferent course. I went to the left into Zulutown. But nowhere on the house roofs or in the trees did I catch sight of the escaped black bird.

Hoping that one of my chums had been more successful than me, I started back, still keeping a sharp lookout for the lost parrot. Pretty soon I met Red limping down the street. He looked like the last rose of summer.

"Nothin' doin'," says he wearily.

I was kind of grouchy.

"All we've done this week," says I, "is search for lost parrots. First it was your aunt's parrot and now it's the Cap'n's parrot. I suppose it'll be somebody else's parrot to-morrow."

The other one laughed.

"Poppy Ott ought to be here. For he's a better parrot hunter than us."

"I haven't seen Poppy since noon," says I.

"I met him down town right after dinner," says Red. "He was making the rounds of the stores for a job. But he hadn't landed anything."

"His pa's got a job," says I. "He's going to do night watching in Dad's brickyard."

Red waggled.

"I like that kid," says he, thinking of our new chum. "I hope he stays here."

Coming to the store, we heard the Cap'n's voice.

But he wasn't raving at Scoop and Peg. So we knew he hadn't found out about the soot trick.

"Howdy, b'ys," says he, when we joined him in the sitting room. "Awful hot afternoon, hain't it? I purty nearly melted rowin' home. Um. . . . I've learnt a lesson, I have. The next time I go fishin' you won't ketch me goin' to sleep in my boat."

Suddenly a wilted voice came out of the wall hole.

"Breakfast," says Red's parrot, whimpering-like. "Polly wants breakfast."

The Cap'n gave us a quick searching look.

"Um. . . . You b'ys kin go home now if you want to," says he, trying to get rid of us. "I won't be a-needin' you any more to-day."

"Breakfast," says the parrot again. "Polly wants breakfast."

I remembered then that this "breakfast" talk was about the only thing that Red's parrot could say.

Peg got my ear.

"Say, Jerry," says he, "have you got your ventrilo handy?"

"Sure thing," says I, feeling in my pockets.

"Then you better crank it up."

"What do you want me to do," says I, "make a sound like a gold fish?"

"That blamed parrot of Red's can't stutter. We never thought of that. So you've got to stutter for it. See?"

Maybe you know what a ventrilo is. It's a little tin jigger that you put in your mouth to throw your voice. Like in ventriloquism. I paid ten cents for mine. The day I got it I took it to school to fool the teacher. I thought it would be fun to throw my voice into the waste-paper basket. But I didn't know how to work it that day. I hadn't practiced. And instead of having fun with the teacher she spotted me right off and sent me up to the principal.

But I learned how to work the ventrilo afterwards. So I was ready now to do some voice throwing at Peg's orders.

"H-h-ham!" says I, trying as best I could to make my voice sound like the black parrot's. "H-h-ham! Rattle their skulls, H-h-ham. Rattle their skulls."

The Cap'n was on needles and pins.

"You b'ys better clear out," says he.

Scoop laughed.

"What's the matter, Cap'n? Are you afraid we'll find out about your black parrot?"

The old man's jaw fell.

"Heh?" says he, staring.

"We know you've got a black parrot over there behind your brother's picture," says Scoop. "So you needn't try to cover up on us. We know it was your brother's parrot, too; and we know that he paid you two thousand dollars for taking care of it."

"I swan!" says the fidgeting old man, sort of gasping in his surprise. "What all *don't* you b'ys know?"

"H-h-ham!" says I again. "H-h-ham! Bring me some h-h-ham and eggs and a b-b-bucket of b-b-blood."

"Why don't you give your bird some fresh air?" says Scoop. "*Good* night! It'll suffocate in that hot hole. Have a heart, Cap'n."

The old man was fearfully worked up.

"You b'ys keep 'way from that thar pesky par'ot," says he in a panting voice. "Don't you go near it to let it git a crack at you. Cats an' codfish—*no!* Why, if you knowed what *I* know 'bout that thar devilish par'ot you wouldn't come in the house even. No, you wouldn't! *Me*—I keep out of its reach, let me tell you. A feller, saiz I, is got only one life to live, an' I hain't a-

goin' to run no chance of havin' my life cut short by no voodoo par'ot."

Scoop was dancing in excitement now.

"Voodoo parrot!" says he. "What do you mean by that, Cap'n? Tell us."

"B'ys," says the old man, more composed now, "that thar par'ot is a' awful worry on my mind. Yes, 'tis. Sometimes I wish that my fool brother haid kep' his devilish par'ot an' his money, too. Fur every minute that it's in the house thar's a risk to me an' to anybody who might come in. That's why I'm keepin' the bird hid. I never told you b'ys 'bout it, fur I didn't want you nor nobody else 'round here to know that it was here."

"Is 'voodoo' a disease?" says Scoop.

At this question the old man then told us that voodooism was a sort of sorcery practiced by the natives of Haiti. On one of his trips to the island the tattooed sailor had learned about a strange "voodoo" parrot in a native temple. The natives called it the "death parrot" because it was black. They were afraid of its bite. It could kill people, they said. It was a "voodooer." The tattooed sailor and another man named Bige Morgan got up the scheme of swiping the black parrot in fun. And one night they stained their bodies to look

like natives and got into the temple. Pretty soon the natives all over the island knew that the voodoo parrot had been stolen. They were crazy. They found out about the two sailors. And to save their lives the sailors put to sea on a raft. The wind blew them into the ocean. Two or three days later they landed on a coral island. Here Bige Morgan died suddenly.

"When I first heerd the story," says the Cap'n, "I told Ham that it warn't no par'ot bite that killed Bige. Nope. He was p'isoned from somethin' he eat. Or mebbe it was a snake bite. But Ham allus was a superstitious cuss. *He* believed in spirits. Why, if I've heerd him tell it once I've heerd him tell it a hundred times how *he* was a-goin' to come back when he was daid an' talk to me. So, with them idears in his head, I never could quite git him to believe that they was no foundation to the voodoo story. An' to that p'int, b'ys, I calc'late that it warn't no good thing fur me to be talkin' 'bout it so much to him. Fur it's a fact I kind of got a halfway superstitious fear of the blamed par'ot myself. Ham wouldn't kill it. He was skeered to kill it—skeered, I mean, that it would bring him bad luck. When he was rescued from the island he took the par'ot with him. An' he haid it fur years an' years be-

fore he died. He kep' it shet up whar it coldn't git a whack at nobody with its bill. Since I brought the par'ot home I've kep' it shet up, too. That was the safest plan. An', as I say, when I feed it I don't git clost up to it. Fur it's a fact, b'ys, I don't *know* that it hain't a voodooer. I kain't hardly swallow the story. But on the other hand I kain't prove that they is no truth in the story without me tryin' the bird out on somebody; an', of course, I won't never do *that*. Great guns —*no!* So you kin see why I don't want you fellers to git near it. Jest leave it alone. Prob'ly nothin' would happen if it did take a nip at you. Still, as I say, I hain't sure. It's better, saiz I, to be safe than sorry. The wrong time to wonder if mushrooms is toadstools is after a feller is got 'em in his stomick."

Well, we didn't laugh at the silly old man in his own house. But we sure did whoop 'er up when we were outside. Such a crazy story!

"To-morrow," says Scoop, "we'll catch Solomon Grundy and switch birds on the old gilly. Then in a week or two we'll tell him the truth about the parrot's escape. It'll put him easy, I bet, to learn that the voodoo story is bunk."

"If we're going to keep his mind easy," says I, "we better keep him away from old Caleb."

"Why so?"

"Old Caleb was bit by the parrot. Red says so. And if the Cap'n finds out about it he'll worry himself sick."

"We'll call on old Caleb after supper," says Scoop, "and sort of hush him up."

Knowing that the stuttering parrot had come from Cedarburg, the same place where the mino bird had been stolen, we had thought for a while that there might be some secret connection between the two unusual birds. But now we put this thought completely aside. It was true that our old friend had been in Cedarburg the week of the mino bird's theft. But that was just a happenstance, Scoop said.

The thing that puzzled us now was the newspaper advertisement. No mention had been made of this by the Cap'n in his talk with us. Yet we knew for a certainty that he had advertised the black parrot for sale.

Was he cheating? Having promised his brother to keep the bird, was he now trying to get rid of it on the sly?

"We'll ask him about the advertisement," says Scoop, "and see what he says."

"Let's quiz him about the spy, too," says I.

"I had thought of doing that," says the leader.

We figured now that the mystery was pretty much cleared up. All that was left was the spy. And the Cap'n probably could tell us who the prowler was.

What we didn't suspect was that the spy was the biggest part of the mystery of all. Yes, sir, the *real* mystery lay ahead of us. A lonely cemetery, an empty grave, a weird voice out of another world. *That* was the kind of stuff we bumped into in working on the mystery.

CHAPTER X

THE ROBBERY

MOTHER was putting the supper on the table when I got home.

"We won't wait for your father," says she, "for Poppy's hungry after his hard work and wants to eat."

I counted four plates on the table.

"Hot dog!" says I. "Is Poppy going to eat with us?"

"He's upstairs in the bathroom washing his face and hands," says Mother. "I asked him to stay to supper. He's a good boy, Jerry."

"You tell 'em," says I.

"What do you suppose he's been doing this afternoon."

"Job hunting?"

"Not all the afternoon. He came to the back door about three o'clock and asked me if he could mow the lawn. I was surprised at first, for that's your job. Then I thought maybe you had asked

him to do it. But he said you hadn't. He wanted to do it, he said, to repay us for the clothes we gave him this morning."

"I noticed that the grass was cut," says I.

"He worked on the lawn for two hours. Then he fixed the hinge on the back door. He's handy with tools."

I hadn't thought of Poppy doing anything like this to repay us for the clothes we had given to him. But I could see now that he had done the right thing. He wasn't the "gimme" kind of a kid, that was one sure thing. He was willing to work for what he got. I liked his spirit.

Giving my cap a throw, I beat it upstairs to the bathroom.

"Hi," says I, digging my new chum in the ribs.

"Hi, Jerry," says he, acting glad to see me.

"You should have been with us this afternoon," says I. "We had a barrel of fun."

"I was busy," says he. Then he laughed. "Say," says he, his eyes twinkling, "do you know where I can get a good wheelbarrow?"

I took my medicine with a grin.

"Any time you want a wheelbarrow," says I, "just write me a note."

"I heard about the four fake notes," says he, laughing.

"The Strickers are blabbing it all over town, hey?"

"Sure thing."

"They won't think it's so funny," says I, "when we turn the tables on them."

"Do I get in on the fun?" says he eagerly.

"*Do* you?" says I. "Kid, we need you. For there's five of them. And with you on our side we'll be even numbers."

Red weaved into the house while we were eating supper. His stomach was all out of kilter, he said, rubbing it. It was his sister's baking-powder biscuits.

"I wouldn't dast to go in swimming to-night," says he, waggling serious-like. "I'd sink."

Mother laughed.

"Shame on you," says she, "for talking that way about your sister's cooking. Clara is a good cook for a young girl. . . . Is your mother still in Chicago?"

"She went to Chicago with Aunt Pansy," says Red.

I grinned at the sufferer.

"Why don't you eat here while your mother's away?" says I.

He jumped at the chance.

"Can I, Mrs. Todd?"

"No, you can't," says Mother. "I wouldn't offend your sister by encouraging you to come here for your meals."

A groan came from the unhappy one.

"If I die before Ma gets home," says he, rolling his eyes like a sick cow, "bury me under the mulberry tree."

"We'll bury you under a gooseberry bush," says Poppy.

Supper over, my two chums went outside as Dad breezed in.

"Well," says he, mussing up my hair, "we have a new night watchman at the factory."

"Mr. Ott?" says I, grinning.

"Sure thing. And for his son's sake I hope he tends to business and makes good. But I don't feel enthused. For he's an absent-minded old codger."

"Jerry has been telling me some very interesting things about this old detective and his son," says Mother. "The boys have taken Poppy into their gang. And they're going to take him to school in September and help make a home for him. I think that's fine."

Dad gave me a look that made me feel good.

"Jerry's all right," says he, bragging on me. "I wouldn't trade him for a million-dollar shoe brush."

Passing into the street, Poppy and Red and I meandered to the corner, where we met Scoop and Peg. The others were headed for old Caleb's place, so we joined them. Coming to the old bachelor's house, we found the front door wide open. But no one answered when we knocked. So we went around the house to the weedy garden, thinking that the old man might be there. But he wasn't.

Peg got his eyes on a man next door.

"Where's Mr. Obed?" says he.

"Him?" says old Paddy Gorbett. "I hain't seed him since the middle of the afternoon."

"His front door's wide open," says Peg.

"Course 'tis. *He* never locks it. Why should he? He hain't got nothin' in thar worth stealin' 'cept mebbe his stuffed birds."

We had seen old Caleb's case of stuffed birds. He has a lot of them. Fixing up stuffed birds is a hobby of his. He has been doing it for years.

Scoop was thirsty. And when he went into the open house to get a drink we followed him. That was all right. For old Caleb was our friend.

Red is quick with his eyes.

"Lookit!" says he, pointing. "Here's a new bird. It must be Mrs. Solomon Grundy."

We ran across the room to the stuffed-bird collection.

"It's a dead-ringer for the Cap'n's parrot," says the observing one.

Peg saw a chance to start an argument.

"A black crow," says he, turning up his nose.

"Like so much mud," says Red, bristling. "It's a black parrot. See its bill."

Poppy was interested in the stuffed bird.

"It isn't a crow," says he, "and it isn't a parrot. I wonder if it isn't a mino bird."

Red gave a yip.

"Maybe it's the stolen mino bird," says he, excited.

"Jinks!" says Peg, his thoughts jumping along. "It could be. For old Caleb was at the sailor's funeral. Don't you remember, fellows? He went with the Cap'n."

"Sure thing," says I, checking back in my memory.

"I bet a cookie," says Red, "that this *is* the stolen mino bird. Old Caleb hooked the bird for his collection. See?"

"Mrs. Strange told my father," says Poppy, "that she would pay him a thousand dollars for

the mino bird. But, of course, the bird isn't worth anything to her dead."

Red screwed up his forehead.

"Is she a mean woman?" says he, after a moment.

"Mean? I don't think so. Why do you ask that?"

"I was thinking," says the freckled one, "that she could put old Caleb in jail for this."

I didn't like the thought of old Caleb going to jail. And I told the others that we ought to keep still about the new stuffed bird until we knew for sure that it was indeed the stolen mino bird.

Poppy took this as a direct hint.

"I give you my promise," says he, "that I won't say anything to Pa about this. It would only excite him and take his mind away from his work. Anyway, he isn't a detective any more—he's a night watchman. So why should I tell him? It will be better for me to keep still."

I grinned.

"You say your pa isn't a detective any more," says I, "but *you* are."

"No," says he, shaking his head.

"Oh, yes you are," says I. "Scoop and I and Red and Peg are Juvenile Jupiter Detectives. And if you're going to be in our gang you've got

to be a Juvenile Jupiter Detective, too. It's fun."

"However," says Scoop, laughing in the recollection of the way old Mr. Arnoldsmith skinned us, "it won't cost you a dollar and a quarter to get in, as it did each of us. We'll let you in free."

It was getting dark now. We could hear the Indian medicine man tooting his bugle to draw a crowd to his free show. So we hurried down town to see the fun.

A lot of people were gathered around the show wagon. But we got good places up in front. A kid always can do that. Bid Stricker was there. I gave him a stiff-arm. He didn't dast to shove back, for he saw my gang. But he had a mean grin. He was thinking about his wheelbarrow trick, I suppose. I can't bear that kid!

The Indian's face was the color of my Sunday shoes—a sort of reddish tan. He had long black hair and black eyes. I never saw sharper eyes in a man. He wore head feathers and his leather pants and jacket had leather fringe. For shoes he had on a pair of beaded moccasins.

Before he started doing his tricks he gave a lecture, telling about himself. It was "me" did this and "me" did that. His talk sounded silly to me. If he was as smart in book education as

he said, and really had been to an Indian college in Pennsylvania, why didn't he use his education and say "I" instead of "me"? I figured it out, though, that he talked this way to sound more like a real Indian. It helped him to get business.

His magic tricks were better than his lecture. White handkerchiefs were changed into fancy flags; a wooden cube was made to cross the stage from one hat to another. I don't remember all of the tricks. But that doesn't matter. The only trick that comes into my story is his "spirit writing."

"My friend Bill," says he, starting the trick, "a heap fine friend Bill was. Poor Bill him die. Bill him go to happy hunting ground. But Bill him come back in spirit. Sure thing, Bill him come back to-night. Bill him write spirit message."

Here he passed out four blank sheets of writing paper. And people wanting to get a "spirit letter" from "Bill" were told to write their names on the sheets. That was to mark them. Then the sheets were rolled up together and put into a glass tube. The tube was corked at the ends. We could see the sheets through the glass. After a few minutes the sheets were taken out. And what do you know if they didn't have writing on them!

"Yes, Bill him heap smart spirit," says the Indian. "Bill him tell everything. Bill him tell old bachelor how to get fine squaw. Sure thing. White squaw. Me mean wife. You call him wife and me call him squaw. One time Bill him tell white man where money hid. Deep down in ground. Man he go dig hole. Get money. Rich man. To-morrow night Bill him write more spirit letters. Maybe Bill him tell where more money hid. Deep down in ground. Then *you* get rich. Bill him heap smart spirit."

At Scoop's signal we got out of the crowd.

"Hot dog!" says he. "Now I know how we can get even with the Strickers and pay them back for that wheelbarrow trick. The 'spirit letter' trick of the Indian's gave me an idea. I know how to do that trick. It's easy."

"Isn't it real magic?" says I.

"Real magic?" says he. "Don't make me laugh, Jerry. There isn't such a thing as real magic. The letters are written ahead of time with invisible ink. And there's a chemical in the corks that causes the writing to show up when the sheets are shut up in the tube. See? But Bid Stricker doesn't know the trick—I could tell so from his face. All right—listen to this."

There was some quick talk.

"Jinks!" says I. "Do you think you can work it?"

"Leave it to me," says the leader.

Red had some money. So we invited him to treat us to ice-cream cones as a sort of celebration of our coming revenge. Then we had some bananas and chocolate bars.

It was ten-thirty now. So we got ready to do some spy capturing in the Cap'n's alley.

"It would be my scheme," says Scoop, taking the lead as usual, "to stretch a rope at each end of the alley. We'll let the man in. See? Then when he tries to run away we'll raise the rope and trip him up."

"He'll get an awful bump," says I.

"We should worry about that. The harder he falls the easier it will be for us to capture him."

"What are we going to do with him after we get him?" says I.

"Make him talk. Maybe we're all wrong in thinking that old Caleb stole the mino bird. Maybe it was this spy."

"I hope so," says I quickly. "For I'd hate to see old Caleb get into trouble."

"If the spy has the stolen mino bird," says Peg, "or knows where it is, it's a cinch, with him hang-

ing around here this way, that there *is* some connection between the two black birds after all."

Scoop waggled.

"The Cap'n has told us a part of his parrot's secret. But I'm convinced that he hasn't told us everything. He's keeping something back."

"We should have quizzed him about the spy," says I.

"Yes," says Scoop, "we could have done that. "But I think it will be more fun to capture the spy and get his story first-handed. That's my idea of real detective work."

So we got the Cap'n's clothesline and cut it in the middle. This gave us two ropes long enough for our purpose. Fixing the ropes, one at each end of the alley, we lay down in the dark.

It came eleven o'clock; then twelve o'clock.

"He ought to come pretty quick," says Peg. "For he was here at midnight last night."

"Sh-h-h-h!" says Scoop.

"I hope he doesn't come at all," says Red, who had been scared from the start.

"We're five to his one," says Scoop. "So what's there to shiver about?"

"He's a man," says Red. "And he's got an awful mean face. I'd hate to have him swish his club at *me*."

Peg chuckled in the dark.

"I bet he'll carry a knife to-night," was the way old hefty further cheered up the frightened one. "A dagger with a double edge."

Red gurgled.

"*Good* night!" says he. "Let's beat it."

We lay in hiding until one o'clock, then gave up our job and started for home. We'd have to try our luck some other night, we said.

The down-town streets were empty. No one was in sight except us. But pretty soon the deep quietness of the business section was broken by a rattling flivver. The car came into sight on the tear. As it passed us we saw that the driver was Bill Hadley, the Tutter marshal.

"Something's happened," says Scoop, excited. "Come on, fellows. Let's follow him."

We set out on the run. Bill, of course, was traveling many times faster than us. But we managed to keep his red tail light in sight.

"He turned into the brickyard," says I, panting.

Poppy gave a queer throat sound.

"I knew it," says he. "It's Pa. He's done something."

The brickyard office was all lit up. Dad was there. We could see him through the open door. We could see Bill Hadley, too, and old Mr. Ott.

Dad had been rummaging the safe.

"Cleaned out as slick as a whistle," says he. Then he turned to Poppy's father, who was standing like a dumb-bell in the middle of the room. "You're *some* watchman, you are! . . . Lock him up, Bill. For there's a lot of money missing."

The old detective got his voice.

"Heh?" says he, cackling-like. "Lock me up, you say? Lock *me* up? What fur? I hain't done nothin'."

Bill snapped a pair of handcuffs on the pottering wrists.

"I've been suspicious of you," says he, scowling, "ever since you hit town."

The old detective drew himself up.

"Um . . ." says he in dignity. "Mebbe you don't know who I be."

Bill grunted.

"I admit it," says he, "but I hain't worryin' none about it."

"Sir," says the old man, "I want you to know that I am a member of the purfession."

"Which purfession?" says Bill, with a sneer. "Safe crackin' or bootleggin'?"

"I am a detective, sir," says Mr. Ott in continued dignity.

"You'll be a 'defective,'" says Bill, grim-like,

"when I get through with you—you old crook!"

Poppy flew into the office then.

"Don't you dare to call Pa a crook," says he, facing Bill with flashing eyes. "For he isn't a crook. He never did a crooked thing in his life. He's queer. But he isn't bad."

Bill stared.

"Who are you?" says he.

"He's my father," says Poppy.

"In that case," says Bill, "mebbe I better lock both of you up."

"Pa isn't guilty," says Poppy, dogged-like. "He wouldn't steal a penny, I tell you."

Bill is awfully blunt.

"Is the old guy cuckoo?" says he, pointing to the prisoner with a jab of his elbow.

Poppy flushed.

"No," says he angrily, "Pa isn't cuckoo. He's just queer. But that's none of your business."

"Sometimes," says Bill, "queer and cuckoo mean the same thing."

That hurt Poppy. And at the moment I wished I was big enough to knock the tar out of Bill. The big bully!

Our new chum had his father by the arm now.

"What happened, Pa?" says he. "Tell me about it. Maybe I can help you."

The old man acted dizzy.

"Why," says he, feeling his way into his thoughts, "I was a-sittin' in here an' all of a sudden a man come in. He said he was the president an' general manager of the company. 'You hain't the man what hired me,' says I. 'No,' says he, 'that was my brother. We run the brickyard together,' says he. 'I'm the president and general manager and my brother's the secretary and treasurer.' He gimme a cigar an' sit down at that desk over thar an' started fussin' with them papers. 'Lots of times,' says he, 'I git up in the middle of the night and come down here and work for an hour or two.' "

"Did he ask you to open the safe so he could rob it," says Bill, sarcastic-like, "or did he open it hisself?"

"*He* opened it. He did it while I was makin' my rounds in the brickyard. When I come back the safe was open, as I say, an' the man was gone."

"And so was my three thousand dollars," says Dad angrily.

"I figured mebbe the safe door ought to be shet. So I telyphoned to you, Mr. Todd. An' then——"

"We know the rest," says Dad, sort of disgusted-like.

"If they's bin a robbery here," says the old detective, looking at the safe, troubled-like, "you kain't blame me. Fur the man said he was your brother, Mr. Todd. Yes, he did. An' when you hired me you never told me that you didn't have a brother."

Bill scowled at the stoop-shouldered prisoner.

"You're a puzzle to me," says he. "I don't know whether you're the slickest crook that ever hit this town or the dumbest."

In the next hour Poppy's father was taken to the jail and locked up in one of the steel cages. Our new chum was all broken up by the arrest. It was discouraging, he said.

Then he clenched his fists, like a fellow does when he gets ready to fight.

"I told you fellows that I didn't care about being a detective," says he, his jaw squared. "But I've changed my mind. I'm going to be a detective and catch this robber. This was *your* case an hour ago. But now it's *my* case. I'm going to take the lead, if you don't mind. For I've got more at stake than you have."

CHAPTER XI

RED'S PREDICAMENT

We were sore at Bill Hadley now. And I must confess, too, that I was a little bit sore at Dad. This thing of locking up Poppy's father was all wrong, we said—only, of course, not wanting to hurt me, the other fellows didn't say very much about Dad's part in the unfair arrest in front of me.

The law had it figured out that the dull-minded old detective knew more about the safe robbery than he was willing to admit. He was acting dumb to cover up, Bill Hadley said. But *we* knew that the old man was innocent. And that is why we were so het up over his arrest.

Afterwards, when I had cooled off, I had to admit to myself that Dad had acted within his business rights in ordering the old detective's arrest. For he didn't know anything about the old man's character except what we had told him. He had no proof that the odd-acting one wasn't a crook.

But you know how it is with a boy in a case like that. He sort of lets his feelings decide things for him. And just now, as I say, in a steady belief in our new chum, our feelings told us that old Mr. Ott was wholly innocent of any unworthy part in the safe looting. And when Poppy made the vow in front of the town jail where the red water hydrant is that he'd go to the ends of the world, as it were, to bring the real thief to justice, and thus clear his father's name, we told him, as loyal pals, to lead on and we would follow. We were with him until the last dog was hung, we said.

And of the four of us no one was more sincerely willing to accept the new leadership than Scoop, himself. I thought that was pretty fine and generous of my old chum. He had been the leader heretofore. But now he was cheerfully willing to let Poppy do the leading. He recognized Poppy's right to leadership.

That's the way for a boy to be, I think. The leadership "hog" doesn't register with me at all. A fellow has got to give and take in this world. He can't be the drum major and head the procession *all* the time.

To go back to the old detective's arrest, we

were sore at Bill Hadley, as I say. Dumb-bell and bully that he was, he would get no help from us, we said, in hot conversation. We would keep away from him. We would work on our own clews and pick up new ones. And in the end we would show *him* a thing or two about clever detecting.

You can see what I mean. *We* knew about the spy. And, further, we knew that the spy, for unknown reasons, was interested in the Cap'n's parrot. The spy, of course, was the man who had robbed the brickyard safe. We had little doubt about that. So all we had to do in order to capture the law breaker was to lay for him near the Cap'n's store. We'd get him sooner or later.

But first, we said, we would find out all we could from the Cap'n about the mysterious prowler. And in that plan we agreed to meet at the bird store the following morning at nine-thirty.

Poppy went home with me that night. Mother let us sleep late. Breakfast over, we went up the creek to the jungle to take care of the rope-tailed horse and see that everything was shipshape around the wagon.

"You better lock up," says I to Poppy, "and

come home with me until your pa is free again. Bring your horse, too. You can keep it in Red Meyer's barn. He won't care."

Going to the bird store, we found old Cap'n Tinkertop in a peck of trouble.

"It's Solomon Grundy," says he, pottering nervously about the room. "They's somethin' the matter with him. He hain't actin' like hisself at all."

A wilted voice came out of the wall hole.

"Breakfast," says the sooted parrot. "Polly wants breakfast."

The troubled looked deepened in the old man's eyes.

"See?" says he, nervous-like. "They's somethin' the matter with that thar par'ot. He never acted meek like that before."

Poppy grinned.

"Maybe he's got the colic."

"Um. . . . I wish he'd git the colic, or somethin' worse'n the colic, an' die. Yes, I do. It would be a big worry lifted off *my* mind."

Poppy got down to business.

"Did you ever try to sell your parrot?" says he.

The old man was caught off his guard in the direct question.

"Heh?" says he, staring.

"One time in the 'for sale' column of a newspaper," says Poppy, "I saw an advertisement of a black parrot. Was it your parrot, Cap'n?"

The old man was still staring.

"Heh? Was it *my* par'ot, you say? What's that?" The wrinkled face changed quickly. "Of course it warn't my par'ot," came the sharp denial. "Now git out of here, you kids, while I do up my housework."

He was lying to us. We could see that. And it was because he feared further unwelcome questions that he wanted to get rid of us.

But we didn't budge.

"Night before last," says Poppy, "a man was seen at your window. My father tried to arrest the suspicious-acting one and was knocked senseless. Now we've got to capture this prowler in order to get my father out of jail. Can you tell us who he is, Cap'n?"

Here a customer came into the store and drew its fidgeting owner's attention. Nor would the old man let us question him further that morning. He was too busy to talk to us, he said, whenever we brought up the subject of the spy. The real point was that he didn't want to talk to us. We realized that.

What was he covering up? Was it a crime of

some kind? Did he know what the black parrot meant in its "blood" talk? And knowing the death parrot's probably wicked secret, did he know, or suspect, who the spy was?

In regard to the newspaper advertisement, we were convinced, as I say, that the secretive one had openly lied to us. He *had* advertised his black parrot for sale, notwithstanding his denial to us. We had proof against him in the shape of the clipping, itself. And, further, his actions had convicted him.

But it was hard for us to understand *why* he had advertised the parrot for sale. It was contrary to his promise to his dead brother.

I went with Poppy that morning to visit his father in the town jail.

"This is a' awful poor jail," says the prisoner, his face clouded with dissatisfaction in his cramped quarters. "I never was in a worse one. No service at all. I didn't even have a feather pilly under my haid last night. An' they's lumps like corncobs in the mattress."

"Bill burnt up the pillows and the good mattresses," says I, "to kill the bedbugs."

The old man scratched himself.

"No runnin' water, either," says he. "Poor! Awful poor!"

"I'll get you a drink," says Poppy quickly.

"Um. . . . The toast was burnt this mornin'," was the further complaint. "An' I didn't have enough butter on it. The coffee was muddy, too."

I had come into the jail with a long face, wanting the prisoner to see that I was sorry for him. But now I had to grin. To hear him talk about the jail's poor "service," you could have imagined that he was the guest of honor in some swell hotel.

We questioned him about the robber, thereby getting a fairly good description of the law breaker. Burning eyes! Just as Red had spoken of the spy's peculiar eyes, so also did the old detective now make similar mention of the safe-breaker's eyes. So we knew beyond all doubt that the spy and the robber were indeed one and the same person.

We covered the town that morning, searching for both the escaped black parrot and the robber. But to no success.

Poppy paid his father another visit that afternoon.

"Maybe this'll help us," says he, when we were all together again in the street.

"A cigar stub!" says Peg, seeing what the leader had.

"I got it from Pa," says Poppy. "It's the cigar

the robber gave him in the brickyard office. Here's the band. Now, let us find out who sells cigars like this."

Well, we went to all the stores in town where cigars were sold. But the storekeepers all shook their heads when we showed them our band. They had no cigars like that in stock, they said.

"Which proves," says Poppy, "that the robber is an out-of-town man, as we suspected."

Mother had said that Red couldn't take his meals at our house. But nevertheless I took him home with me that night to supper, along with Poppy.

There was a lot of talk at the table bearing on the safe robbery. Bill hadn't captured the robber, Dad said. In this piece of news I winked at my chums.

"Has Bill got any clews?" says I.

"He has a good description of the man," says Dad. "So it hadn't ought to be much of a trick for the law to catch him."

"I don't suppose it ever occured to Bill," says I, "that the robber is probably disguised."

Dad stopped eating and looked at me sharply.

"Disguised?" says he. "What do you mean?"

"Bill may have passed the man a dozen times to-day without recognizing him."

"By George!" says Dad, excited. "I'll tell him about that."

I grinned.

"You can't beat a Juvenile Jupiter Detective," says I, bragging on myself.

"You admit it, hey?"

I put out my chest.

"I can't deny the truth," says I, still grinning.

"No? Well, Mr. Juvenile Jupiter Todd, what'll you and your gang of sleuths take to capture this robber for me?"

"What'll you give?" says I.

"Um. . . . Will a hundred dollars be too much?"

"A hundred dollars apiece?"

"Say, why don't you stick a gun under my nose and hold me up right!"

"Make it a hundred dollars apiece," says I, "and we'll do the job for you."

He laughed. He thought I was talking through my hat.

"All right," says he, feeling safe in the generous promise. "If you boys capture the robber I'll pay each of you a hundred dollars."

Here Mother came into the conversation.

"Did I tell you, Donald," says she to Red, who was doing a sword-swallowing act with his fork

and a hunk of cake, "that I had a short letter from your mother to-day?"

"I suppose she wanted you to get after me," says the freckled one, between bites, "and make me wash up and put on clean clothes."

Mother laughed.

"She did say something like that. But I took it as a joke. What interested me in the letter was her account of a dream that your aunt had."

Red grunted.

"Aunt Pansy is always having 'dreams,' " says he. "Whenever she misses anything in her room at our house she 'dreams' that I took it and I get licked. Huh! Can I have another piece of cake, Mrs. Todd?"

"The dream was about the escaped parrot," says Mother, passing the cake plate.

Red's jaw dropped.

"Which parrot?" says he like a dumb-bell before I could kick him under the table.

"Why, your aunt's parrot, of course. The one you captured yesterday."

Red started breathing again.

"Oh, yes," says he.

"Your aunt will be glad, I know, to learn that her parrot is safe in its cage. For in her dream she saw it in a black cistern."

Red quit eating. He had lost his appetite.

"What'd I tell you?" says he, when we followed him into the yard.

I grinned.

"Aunty spank, hey, when she finds out that her 'ittle nephew put nasty soot on Polly's tail!"

"Aunty will pulverize me," says he, shivering. "Gosh! I knew I'd get into trouble in letting you fellows black up her parrot. I was a dumb-bell to consent to it."

"Shucks!" says I. "Your aunt's parrot will be safe in its cage by the time she gets home. So why worry? You aren't in any danger."

"You don't know my Aunt Pansy! After dreaming that her parrot was in danger she'll ask me a million questions about it. And if she finds the least trace of soot. . . . *Good* night!"

Again we put in the evening at the Indian's medicine show, after which, in a plan to lay for the spy, we headed for the Cap'n's alley.

An automobile stopped near us under a street light.

"Maybe you'd like to take a little ride this evening," says Mr. Meyers to Red.

"Where are you going?" says the latter.

"Over to Ashton and back."

"What for?"

"To get your mother and your Aunt Pansy."

Red stared.

"I thought Ma and Aunt Pansy were in Chicago?" says he.

"They stopped in Ashton on their way home this afternoon. I just got a telephone call from them asking me to drive over and get them."

Red looked sick.

"You told me they weren't coming home till Friday," says he.

Mr. Meyers laughed. He likes to joke.

"Your Aunt Pansy got homesick for her parrot, I guess. She had a bad dream about it, you know. I told her over the telephone that you had caught the parrot for her. She says she's going to give you a big kiss."

"*Good* night!" says Red, looking around for a nice comfortable place to faint. "I'll get something, all right, but it won't be a kiss."

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing."

Red's sister hasn't any patience with small boys.

"Well," says she, from the back seat of the car, "are you going with us, Mr. Importance, or aren't you?"

Red sent them off without him. Then he turned to us.

"You fellows got me into this," says he, "and now you've got to get me out of it."

"Don't worry," says Poppy. "We can get your parrot easy enough. We'll do that first."

The bird store was in darkness. So we knew its owner was in bed. Sometimes he goes to sleep with his windows open. But we weren't lucky tonight in finding an open window.

However, we knew a secret way into the house. So up the fire escape we went to the roof, the five of us, and down through the scuttle into the attic.

Poppy had a flashlight. He was the first one to drop into the sitting room through the raised trapdoor. I followed. Then Scoop and Red came down beside me. Peg stayed in the attic to help us up.

The black parrot was sound asleep in its cage. It didn't see us at all.

"Grab it!" says I to Red, anxious to get away.

Poppy laughed.

"Be careful, though," says he, "that it doesn't 'voodoo' you."

Red was afraid that when he touched the parrot it would wake up and nab him. So to save his hands he snatched a tidy from a chair and threw the cloth over the sleeping bird. The wrapped-up parrot was then handed to Peg, after which the

big one gave us his hands and drew us into the attic. Closing the trapdoor, we got on the roof and soon landed safely in the alley.

The clock in the tower on College Hill donged eleven times. The spy was likely to be along any minute now. And in planning the prowler's capture Poppy said that he and the other two would do the trip-up stuff with the ropes while Red and I cleaned the parrot.

Nobody was at home at the Meyers' house. So that was the best place to wash the parrot, Red said. A few minutes later he and I turned in at the darkened house. The front-door key was in the mail box. Entering the house, we ran up the stairs to the bathroom.

In the lead with the parrot, my companion switched on the bathroom lights and gave the tidy a shake. Out came the black parrot. But instead of using its wings in its release from the tidy it dropped to the floor with a dull hollow sound.

"What the dickens? . . ." says Red, staring. Then he stooped quickly. "Jerry! *Look!*"

"The stuffed parrot!" says I.

I guess you can imagine how bewildered we were in learning that the bird that we had lugged home wasn't the sooted parrot at all but old Caleb Obed's stuffed mino bird.

CHAPTER XII

THE BURGLAR

LIKE the ship captain who staggered down the stairs, Red yipped that he was lost. He'd catch it now, he said, tearing his hair. Nothing could save him.

"My aunt's got an awful temper," says he. "She's a regular old rip-snorter when she gets going. And she'll get Ma on her side and between them they'll salivate me."

I was doing some fast thinking.

"You've still got a chance," says I.

"The parrot's lost," says he, grabbing a fresh handful of hair, "and I'm lost."

"The thing for us to do," says I, "is to stretch our legs in the direction of old Caleb's house. For that's where the sooted parrot is, I bet."

But all he could do was to yip in despair.

"I'm a goner, Jerry," says he, getting ready to sink.

I felt like giving him a swift kick.

"You won't be a goner," says I sharply, "if you'll listen to me and do as I say."

"But what can I do?" says he, with a helpless look.

I told him my thoughts. The switching of the stuffed bird for the sooted bird was undoubtedly a trick of old Caleb's, I said. Consequently the old bachelor would know where the sooted parrot was. So the thing for us to do was to run to his house as fast as we could.

"Having spoiled his trick on the Cap'n," says I, "he may be sore at us at first. But he'll give up the sooted parrot to us when he learns the predicament you're in."

Switching off the lights and locking the front door, we hurried into the street. Coming to the shabby house that we had visited the preceding evening, we failed, as before, to get a response to our raps.

Old Caleb had been known to drink moonshine. Some men make fools of themselves that way. And thinking that possibly he was drunk, we struck a match and went inside the house, the door of which still stood wide open. There was a hand lamp on the sitting-room table. Lighting the lamp with our match, we went into the bedroom where the owner slept. But he wasn't there.

Then we searched the house for the sooted parrot. Failing to find it, or any trace of it, we were forced to accept the conclusion that the old man was away somewhere with the bird. That in itself was something of a mystery, considering the late hour.

More bewildered than ever, we went in search of our chums to tell them our queer story. But they weren't in the bird-store alley. Not knowing where to look for them, the only thing left for us to do was to go home.

Coming to the Meyers' house, we saw a moving flashlight upstairs, which, in itself, told us that the family had returned in the time that he had been away.

Red sort of collapsed at the foot of the gallows.

"Oh! . . . I don't want to go in, Jerry. I'll get an awful licking. Can't you think of some scheme to save me?"

"My thinker has a flat tire," says I.

Here the telephone bell rang in the lower hall. But no one came downstairs to answer the call. That was queer, I thought.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling went the bell.

Suddenly the thought came to me that the man in the house wasn't Mr. Meyers at all. It was the burglar! You can imagine how excited I was. I

told Red my suspicions. And together we ran to the barn where the automobile was kept. But the car wasn't there. So we knew now that the house was being burglarized.

More excited than ever we ran back to the front porch, noticing for the first time that the front door was wide open. Upstairs the light had moved into another room. Sharpening our ears, we could detect the sound of disturbed dresser drawers. Plainly every light thing of value in the house was going into the burglar's bag.

Hidden in the shrubbery near the front door steps, my fingers suddenly closed over a wire that Mrs. Meyers had put up for a porch vine to perform on. At the touch of the heavy wire I thought of our alley ropes and a plan popped into my head. I told Red. Then between us we got the wire down and stretched it from post to post in front of the open door, after which we galloped around the house to the back porch.

It was our scheme to make the burglar think that we were about to enter the kitchen. Then when he ran out of the house through the front door our wire would trip him up and send him sprawling on his snout. Red had a croquet mallet and I had a paving brick. Between us we figured that we could put the law breaker to sleep in a

jiffy, even if he didn't nicely crack his neck in his tumble down the steps.

Stomping on the back porch, and rattling the doorknob, we then clattered in high hopes around the house to our wire trap. And sure enough we could hear the alarmed burglar sliding for first base down the stairs. A form darted into sight through the open door. It was a man.

Gee-miny crickets! You should have heard the yelp that came out of the burglar when he struck our stretched wire. He had stuffed several of Mrs. Meyers' pillowcases full of loot and now the contents of the pillowcases flew in all directions. The air was full of flying arms and legs and silver spoons.

Running forward to land on the sprawled law breaker with my five-pound paving brick, I was suddenly struck in the face by something from one of the pillowcases. I began to spit feathers—nasty tasting feathers. Phew! All I could think of at first was a feather duster dipped in filth. Then, realizing that I had headed into something a lot more lively and dangerous than a feather duster, I dropped the paving brick with a wild yelp and clutched my hooked nose.

"Breakfast," says the feathery mess that had fastened itself to my nose. "Polly wants breakfast."

CHAPTER XIII

POOR POLLY!

RED bragged afterwards that he whacked the burglar six times with his croquet mallet before the housebreaker got up and scooted into the night. But I can hardly swallow that heroic story. For I know Red! That same week his mother discovered a crack in her fancy lawn urn. And if the rattle-headed one hit anything at all I bet a cookie it was the urn.

However, the man wouldn't have gotten away from *me,* let me tell you, if it hadn't been for that blamed parrot. Yes, sir, if Solomon Grundy, Jr., hadn't handicapped me by attaching himself to the roof of my nose, I would have landed neatly on the escaping one's cranium with my paving brick. One swing of my trusty right arm and Mr. Burglar would have been a dish rag.

But the point is that the law breaker *did* get away from us. That was a big disappointment. Yet, with the sooted parrot miraculously delivered into our hands in the eleventh hour, so to speak,

we couldn't kick on the way Fate was managing things for us. There was mystery in the burglar's possession of the sooted parrot, but we didn't let that confuse us—not then! We had other things to think about.

The burglar's loot was scattered all over the lawn. In the mess of stuff we picked up an Ingersoll watch and Mrs. Meyers' silver-backed dresser set and the solid silver shaving mug that Red got as a premium for selling twenty colored pictures of "Washington Crossing the Delaware" and probably forty or fifty pieces of table silver, such as spoons, knives and forks.

Dumping the recovered loot into the hall, we scooted up the stairs to the bathroom. Turning on the water in the tub, some hot and some cold, we made a deep oozy suds and got busy on the bird, finding to our great satisfaction that the soot came off easily.

"Breakfast," says the blinking, bedraggled parrot, eyeing us reproachful-like. "Polly wants breakfast."

I grinned at Red.

"It isn't every parrot," says I, sloshing around in the suds, "that has two servants to give it a bawth."

He laughed at that.

"It's a good thing," says he, "that the parrot can't tell on us. Or I'd catch it from my aunt—bu-lieve me!"

"Here," says I, shoving a towel at him, "take this and finish the job."

In the drying process the parrot suddenly stiffened out like a poker.

"Holy cow!" says Red, his eyes swelling in horror. "It's dead!"

I told him that the parrot probably had swallowed too much water. And knowing the trick of reviving a drowning man by pumping his arms up and down, I got busy and pumped the parrot's wings. But to no good results. Nor did the feathered hunk stir when I gave it a whiff of Mrs. Meyers' smelling salts.

Red was tearing his hair again.

"It's dead, I tell you," says he, suffering at the top of his voice. "Oh, oh, oh! Now I'm in for it worse than ever."

Here an automobile cantered down the street and stopped in front of the house. I thought sure it was Red's people. And of no desire to be caught in the house with the guilty one and his dead parrot I beat it for the stairs.

In the excitement my chum had forgotten about his earlier intention of staying all night with me.

But he remembered it now. And grabbing the parrot, eager to delay his punishment, he made quick work of following me down the stairs to the lawn, where we saw the car that we had thought was his father's turning into a private drive on the opposite side of the street.

On the hall table in my home I found a note from Mother explaining that Mr. Meyers, stalled in his auto halfway between Ashton and Tutter, had telephoned to Dad to come and pick him up.

"If you get home before we do," the note concluded, "please don't forget to lock the doors when you go to bed. For we don't want to have another robbery in the family."

Wanting to do the handsome thing by my company, I set out a bedtime lunch of two bananas apiece and some cookies and half a lemon pie, after which we headed for our roost. As I was undressing I suddenly noticed that my invited bedfellow was acting queer. His mind seemed to be somewhere else. I thought, of course, that he was worrying about the dead parrot. But it wasn't the parrot that he was thinking about, he said, it was his pajamas—he had forgotten to bring them along. I told him that he could use a pair of my pajamas. But, no, he held off, he had to have his

own night clothes. So home he went to get them.

He was gone about five minutes. I was sitting on the edge of the bed when he came upstairs. Not for one instant had he fooled me. It wasn't the need of pajamas that had taken him back home—I realized that. He had a hidden reason.

While I was debating in my mind whether I should ignore him or pump him, a car drove into the yard. A few moments later footsteps sounded on the front porch and my parents came into the house.

I heard Dad lock the door. Then the telephone bell rang.

"Yes," says Mother, in answer to a question that had been put to her over the wire. There was a moment's silence. "Why, how dreadful!" came the cry. "Yes, indeed—we'll come over right away." Dad was called. "It's Mrs. Meyers," says Mother in continued excitement. "Their house has been robbed. Even the parrot's gone. And she says the filthy thief had the nerve to take a bath in her clean tub—there's a ring on the tub, she says, that looks just like soot."

At first surprised and puzzled that Red's folks should completely overlook the stuff in the front hall, I suddenly tumbled to the truth of the matter. To escape a licking in the parrot's un-

fortunate death my tricky chum had hidden the burglar's loot. That is what had taken him home. No wonder his folks thought they had been robbed!

"It's queer," says I, in a scheme to pry the tricky one out of his hole, "that your folks overlooked the stuff in the front hall. For we left everything in a pile."

He didn't say anything.

"I'm going to tell Dad," says I, starting to pile out of bed.

He stopped me.

"Don't do that, Jerry. Please. You'll get me in an awful fix if you do."

"You're already in a fix," says I.

"Not like you think."

Here was my chance.

"Red Meyers," says I, giving him a scowl, "what have you been up to?"

"I—I didn't want to get licked, Jerry. So I made a bundle of the stuff that we picked up on the lawn and dumped it into your ma's cistern."

I gave a squeak.

"For the love of mud!" says I weakly.

Here Mother came to the foot of the stairs.

"Are you awake, Jerry?"

"Sure thing," says I.

"I thought I heard voices up there. Did you hear me tell your father about the robbery?"

Red gripped my hand.

"Don't squeal on me, Jerry," says he, begging.

I didn't. For when a fellow is your chum, even if he does something sneaking, you've got to stand by him to sort of help him square himself.

But I read the tricky one a sharp lecture, let me tell you, when we had the house to ourselves, Mother having hurried to the scene of the "robbery" to comfort the weeping parrot owner, and Dad to help his excited neighbor go over the yard for clews.

Instead of having benefited himself, I lectured the culprit, he had gotten himself, and all the rest of us, into a deeper hole than ever.

CHAPTER XIV

THE VANISHED TOWNSMAN

At the breakfast table the following morning Dad joked me, in his usual jolly way, about my skinned nose, inquiring, chummy-like, if I had been in a scrap with the Stricker gang, to which I replied truthfully that I hadn't.

Red was fidgety in the conversation. He was scared that the older one would pin me down and thus learn the truth about my nose scratches. So it was a relief to both of us when my talkative parent was called to the telephone.

"Who was it?" says Mother, when Dad came back to the table with a big grin on his face.

"Bill Hadley. He wants me to bring a few of our new talking-machine records down to the jail."

"Talking-machine records?" says Mother, puzzled at the marshal's sudden interest in music. "Why is he calling on *you* for records?"

"Because his prisoner is partly my responsibility, I guess."

"You mean Mr. Ott?"

"Sure thing. Bill says the old gent did a lot of kicking yesterday on the service he was getting. So our accommodating marshal has been stepping around since to redeem himself. He even has a Victrola in the cell now."

Mother isn't crazy over Bill, though she's awfully chummy with his wife, an old school teacher of mine.

"What nonsense!" says she.

"I forgot to ask him," says Dad, in continued laughter, "whether he wanted Caruso records or jazz."

"Bill might better forget about his sense of humor and do his work," says Mother stiffly, thinking of the burglar.

"Oh," says Dad, who is never too busy or too worried to enjoy a good joke, "there's time for a little fun on every job."

Red and I had heard enough to want to get down town in a hurry. So as soon as breakfast was over we grabbed our caps and scooted into the street.

Bill Hadley scowled at us when we tumbled into the town hall where he has his office. That's his way with kids. He does it to make us realize the importance of his position, I guess.

"What's the idea of all the racket?" says he sharply.

"We came down to see the fun," says I, grinning.

"What fun?"

"You know—what you told Dad over the telephone."

That brought out a grin.

"Um. . . . Mr. Ott is busy with his mornin' newspapers jest now. But I guess you kids kin take a peek at him if you'll promise to be quiet an' not disturb him."

Tiptoeing into the back room where the steel jail cages were, I thought I'd die when I saw the way the prisoner's cell had been dolled up. On one steel wall was a long pansy picture—"A Yard of Pansies" is the right name for it, I guess—and on the opposite wall was a "God Bless Our Happy Home" sampler. A fancy curtain hung over the steel door. The floor was covered with a swell red rug—as I remember, it was a rug with a picture of a pony in the center—and the cell was further brightened up with a reading lamp, a potted fern, a magazine table, a smoking stand, a talking-machine and an easy chair. Cooled by the breeze from an electric fan, the contented prisoner was now stretched at ease in the soft chair, his lap full of newspapers.

"Um. . . ." says he, looking up and getting

Bill's eye. "I furgot to tell you, Mr. Hadley, that I don't like tea of any kind. So don't ever bring me none. Coffee is what I like, with a lot of rich cream in it—an' not condensed cream, nuther."

Bill gravely got out a memorandum book and pretended to write in it.

"Coffee," says he slowly, "with a lot of cream in it—real cream from contented cows. An' how much sugar, Mr. Ott?"

"Um. . . . Two spoonfuls, if you please."

"Anything else?"

The old man pondered.

"I kain't jest recollect anything special right now. But when Poppy comes around, you're to send him right in. Fur I want to see him."

"Very well, Mr. Ott," says Bill, acting as though he was taking orders from a king.

Well, Red and I pretty nearly busted ourselves laughing when we were outside. Bill was funny, we said. But when Poppy came down the street with Scoop and Peg, and learned about the decorated cell, he was mad as hops.

"They're making a monkey of Pa," says he, his eyes flashing. "I wish I was big enough to lick the guy who started it."

He hurried into the jail then. And I guess he

told Bill Hadley a thing or two. For, bu-lieve me, that kid knew how to use his tongue. I'll tell the world! And he wasn't afraid of anybody, either.

Checked up by our new chum, I was ashamed of myself now to think that I had laughed on Bill's side. As Poppy had said, the officer was making a monkey of the old prisoner, and that wasn't the right thing to do. Still, I considered, as long as the old man had to be locked up in jail it was just as well that he had everything cozy and comfortable. That was a lot better for him than being discontented.

"Pa is nobody's fool," says Poppy, when he came back to us. "*He* thinks the joke is on the marshal. And I'm not so sure that it isn't."

"I thought maybe he had something more to tell you about the safe robber," says I.

"No. He just wanted to show me how his cell was fixed up. *I* was mad about it. But he told me to keep my mouth shut. He knew what he was doing, he said."

We started down the street then.

"I suppose you wonder where I was last night," says Poppy, linking arms with me.

"Did you stay with Scoop?"

"I had to, when I lost track of you."

"Red stayed at my house," says I.

He grinned.

"If I had been there we could have had some fun, hey?—three in a bed."

"Not *last* night," says I, serious.

"No?"

"Too many queer things happened last night for fun," says I.

That turned his thoughts back.

"Did you know, Jerry, that we saw the spy last night? Sure thing. He came into the alley, but not far enough for us to trip him up."

"We would have gotten him, though," put in Scoop, "if Peg hadn't coughed on a bug. He beat it then."

"Didn't you follow him?" says I.

"We tried to," says Poppy, "but he was too slick for us."

Here I told the others the truth about the Meyers robbery. Amazed at first at our surprising adventure, they almost threw a fit when they learned what a clever little "fixer" Red was.

"Oh, oh!" says Scoop, rocking his head in his hands. "Nobody at home! Kid, if ever there was a poor fish that flopped out of the frying pan into the fire it's you."

But this kind of talk didn't upset Red. He

stepped around as unconcerned as you please. Having escaped a licking in his trickery, everything was lovely with him now.

"Tra-la-la," says he, showing off. "Listen to the praise I'm getting."

"It's the craziest scheme I ever heard tell of," says Peg. "The idea of dumping all that stuff into a *cistern!* Ye bums and buttered biscuits! And the less credit to you, Red Meyers, it's an out and out lie. Yes, it is. Letting your folks believe that they have been robbed is just the same as telling them a lie."

"Tattletale!" says Red.

Peg colored up.

"No, I won't tattle on you," says he steadily. "But I can tell you this much, kid: If you don't square yourself with your folks at the first opportunity you're out of my gang for life. Get me? I may not be perfect, but I'm no sneak. And, further, you've got to buy your aunt a new parrot. I'll help on that, for in coaxing you into the parrot fight I'm as guilty in the parrot's death as you are."

Poppy didn't jump on Red like the others. That wasn't his style. Anyway, he hadn't known us for so very long and therefore was kind of careful in his talk to us.

"What became of the dead parrot, Jerry?" says he, getting my eye.

I shrugged.

"Ask Red," says I. "He had it last."

"Like fun I did," says freckle-face, stiffening. "*You* had it last. Don't you remember?—I handed it to you when I locked the front door."

"*I* locked the front door," says I.

"Yes, you did—*not.*"

"I did, too."

"You didn't."

That's Red for you. He'll argue when he knows he's wrong. Bullhead stuff, I call it. Of course, *I* was right.

Poppy then questioned us about the burglar, wanting to know if we had gotten a look at the man's face, or had heard his voice. And after considerable talk back and forth we came to the general conclusion that the man Red and I had seen and the man who had robbed the brickyard safe was unquestionably one and the same person. For the description of one fitted the other.

But it puzzled us to understand why the criminal was hanging around town. He had Dad's three thousand dollars. Why then didn't he play safe and beat it?

Was he waiting for a chance to steal the black

parrot? Was there some secret reason—some very important reason—why he had to have the unusual parrot? And was it his scheme to get possession of the parrot, through hook or crook, and then make a break for safety?

In planning things our decision was that it would pay us to keep on guarding the alley. We would go there every night, we said. And sooner or later we would succeed in the criminal's capture.

In the course of our conversation I mentioned old Caleb Obed.

"Do you suppose," says I, "that the spy and old Caleb are in cahoots?"

Poppy got my eye.

"What do you mean by that?" says he quickly.

"Sometime last evening," says I, "old Caleb switched birds on the Cap'n. In running off with the sooted parrot he thought, of course, that he had the real Solomon Grundy. Later on, as we know, the parrot turned up in the robber's hands. So Caleb either gave it away or had it stolen from him."

"That reminds me," says Scoop, "that I tried to find old Caleb yesterday afternoon and couldn't. Nobody around here seems to know where he is.

So you may be wrong, Jerry, in thinking that he was in the Cap'n's store last night."

"But who else could have switched the birds?"

"Search me."

"I bet it was old Caleb," says Peg. "For he's a deep one, let me tell you. I've had a hunch all along that he knows things that he doesn't want us to know. And instead of giving all of our attention to the spy, it would be my suggestion that we keep an eye on the old man, too."

Here a boy friend of ours came down the street on the run with a note for me.

"It's from Cap'n Tinkertop," says the kid, panting. "He says it's important."

I opened the note, wondering what had happened in the bird store to thus cause our old friend to write to me.

Thirteen!

This single word, written over the Cap'n's sprawled signature, was the only message that the crumpled note contained. But I understood the message. And showing the others the note, which I knew was no trick of the Strickers', I led my chums an excited and breathless race down the street to the bird store.

"Thirteen," I might explain, is our danger signal. Known only to ourselves and to a few of our trusted friends, of whom the Cap'n was

one, it was supposed to be used only in moments of great peril.

We found the bird-store proprietor quavering behind closed doors and drawn window shades.

"B'ys," says he, in a husky voice, "I'm in a' awful fix. I'm perty near crazy, I be. Jest look at me sweat! I'm wringin' wet," and he swabbed his drenched face with a soggy handkerchief.

There was an open traveling bag on a chair. And we saw that its owner had been packing it.

"I'm gittin' ready to flee," says he. "It's that or go to jail. An' I hain't a-goin' to let the law git its hands on me to hang me if I kin help it."

"What have you done," says Poppy, troubled, "that the law should be after you?"

The old man panted.

"It's that blamed par'ot, b'ys."

"Your black parrot?"

"Yes. It's bin stole. Some one took it on me last night. But that hain't the cause of my trouble. The thing that's worryin' me is what the par'ot did before it was stole."

"What do you mean?"

"It's gone an' voodooed a man. Yes, it hais," the voice stiffened, as one of us laughed, "an' you needn't act smart 'bout it, nuther. It hain't no laughin' matter, let me tell you. Jumpin'

Jupiter—*no!* Fur if the man is daid, as I suspect, the only thing fur me to do to save my neck from the gallus is to git out of the country. Otherwise the law'll take me in hand an' hold me responsible, it bein' my par'ot."

"Oh, Cap'n!" says Poppy. "Don't be a goose. There's no truth in that crazy voodoo story. It *can't* be true."

The packer went on with his work.

"Aw! . . . Come out of it, Cap'n. You don't have to skin out of town. Of course not. You've just had a bad dream."

The gingerbread eyes sought ours.

"B'ys, be you a-goin' to stand by me?"

"Of course," says Poppy quickly. "But——"

"They hain't no 'but.' I know what I'm talkin' 'bout. Somewhar at this very minute ol' Caleb Obed is layin' daid—struck down an' killed by that thar devilish voodoo par'ot."

"Caleb Obed!" came the cry from our new leader, looking at us.

"You b'ys don't know it, but ol' Caleb called to see me the afternoon I was down the river. Jest heow long he was in the store I kain't say. No one to my knowledge saw him go in. But Matsy Bacon saw him come out. He was runnin', Matsy saiz, an' screechin' to beat the cars. They

was blood on his face. 'The par'ot!' he screeched. 'The black par'ot!' Wal, Matsy *he* figured it out as heow the screecher was on another toot. 'What's the matter, Caleb?' saiz he. 'Be you seein' black par'ots this time 'stead of green an' yaller rattlesnakes?' An' then, so Matsy saiz, Caleb he screeched, 'It flew at me an' tried to kill me.' After which, so Matsy saiz, the screecher went down the street on the trot, sort of limpin' an' staggerin'.

"Matsy told me the hul story this mornin' when he was in the store. 'Did you know,' saiz he, thinkin' as heow it was a good joke, 'that one of your par'ots slivered a hunk of skin out of ol' Caleb Obed the other afternoon?' Figurin' that Matsy was up to some kind of nonsense, I saiz, in fun, 'So one of my par'ots bit a hunk out of ol' Caleb, hey? Fine! Now I won't have to buy the par'ot no fresh meat.' Wal, we talked some more, me an' Matsy. He told me 'bout seein' Caleb come out of my alley door. I in turn told him how a certain par'ot of mine had bin took from my store last night between nine o'clock an' midnight, only, of course, I didn't tell him it was a real black par'ot, fur he never dreamed fur one minute that I had sech a thing in the store. 'Mebbe,' saiz Matsy, in further fun, 'it was ol'

Caleb who hooked your par'ot on you in revenge; an' mebbe he hooked the other par'ot, too.' 'What other par'ot?' saiz I. 'Last night,' saiz Matsy, 'they was another par'ot stole on Main Street.' "

"We know about that," says Poppy, giving Red a queer look.

"Wal, Matsy an' me we talked some more. An' then, b'ys, it come to me all of a sudden that here was a test case. I warn't scared at first like I be now, but I was awfully excited. An' I lit out fur ol' Caleb's house on the trot, wantin' to see fur sure that he was all right an' haidn't been voodooed. The nearer I got to his place the more fidgety I got. Suppose, I saiz to myself, that I should find him daid after all. Of course I wouldn't, I saiz, tryin' not to believe the voodoo story. But jest suppose I *should*. What would happen to me then? Wal, I come to Caleb's house . . . it was wide open . . . but he wasn't thar! He haidn't bin thar, Paddy Gorbett told me, since day before yeste'day at three o'clock. I saiz, foxy-like, 'When you seed him then, Paddy, did he have red paint on his face?' 'Was it paint?' saiz Paddy. 'I thought it was blood.' I held myself steady, not wantin' to git him suspicious of me. 'Did he tell you,' saiz I,

'how the blood come to be thar?' 'No,' saiz Paddy, 'I didn't talk with him.'

"An' that, b'ys, is my story. Mebbe I'm a ol' gilly, as you think. Mebbe they hain't a particle of truth in the voodoo story. When I told you the story I didn't half believe it myself. But now I'm preparin' fur the worst. Yes, sir, I'm a-goin' to git everything in readiness, without anybody seein' me, so that I kin skin out on a moment's warnin'. An' thar is whar you kin help me. With your young legs you kin git 'round spry an' cover a lot of territory. Besides, as I know, you're perty smart at pickin' up clews an' sech. What I want you to do fur me is to find ol' Caleb, or find his body. An' if he's daid, as I think, I want you to come here an' tell *me* first. As you kin see I'm innocent of any intended wrongdoin'—I'm a victim of circumstances, as the sayin' is. An' as an ol' friend of yours who has always stood by you in thick an' thin, an' seeing' as heow you already know the par'ot's secret, I feel I've got a right, under the circumstances, to ask this of you. Don't repeat a word of what I've jest told you. But start out. An' whether it's a livin' man that you find, or a chilled corpse, let *me* know first. Give me two or three hours start, an' then you kin go to the law with your story."

We were sorry for the frightened old man. And we tried to tell him how foolish it was of him to think for one minute that old Caleb had actually been "voodooed." There was another explanation for the vanished one's disappearance, we said. But we couldn't turn him.

"B'ys, you mean well enough, but you don't know what you're talkin' 'bout. No, you don't. I didn't mention this part to you when I told you the voodoo story, but it's a fact that Ham *he* died sudden, too. An' thar on the wall by his bed —I kin see it yet!—was a picture of a par'ot, drawn with charcoal. A black par'ot! An' when they come to close his eyes they jest couldn't make 'em stay closed at all—every time the eyes was pressed shet they'd pop right open ag'in, jest like the daid brain held a *secret* that the eyes was tryin' dumbly to tell about. It's a part of the voodoo, b'ys—the starin', glassy eyes. It was that way with Bige Morgan, an' it was the same with Ham. You'll see what I mean when you find ol' Caleb. And in that p'int, mebbe you better git started in your search right away. I'll wait here out of sight till I git word from you, good or bad, only I hain't expectin' nuthin' but bad news, I kin tell you that much."

CHAPTER XV

A WILD NIGHT

WELL, we had something to think about now. While we didn't share the Cap'n's crazy belief that his old friend had been "voodooed" by the escaped death parrot, it was a fact that we had no other explanation to offer of the old townsman's sudden disappearance. And it did give us a kind of queer feeling to know that the old man had vanished on the heels of the parrot's attack. His disappearance seemed to bear out the voodoo story, all right.

But, even so, we steadily refused to take any stock in the crazy voodoo belief. The Cap'n's talk about his dead brother's "glassy eyes" was all bunk, we said. As for old Caleb, he would turn up all right. We were sure of that. So instead of wasting our time searching for him we would give our immediate attention to capturing the escaped parrot. That was the most important job, we concluded.

It was our intention to secretly return the re-

covered parrot to its cage in the wall hole. Later on, when Red had squared himself with his aunt, we would tell the parrot's owner the truth about his bird's unknown escape and its later supposed "theft."

We put in a busy forenoon. Covering the small town, we separately searched the trees and housetops. But, as before, we met with no success. Solomon Grundy was nowhere to be seen.

Nor did we see anything of Caleb Obed, though we inquired for him at different homes where he was known to drop in occasionally. No one with whom we talked, even his closest friends, could tell us where he was.

It was now brought home to us that the townsman's disappearance was a more serious matter than we had imagined. So we gave his case our main attention. Searching the still open house for possible clews bearing on his disappearance, we found a bloody towel in the kitchen. There were dried blood spots, too, in the kitchen sink. The sight of blood always gags me. Like castor oil. So I kept away from the nasty towel. Nor did I touch the sink where the bleeding man, after his attack from the parrot, had plainly washed himself and dressed his head wound.

In an old sugar bowl in the cluttered cupboard we found a handful of silver coins and six dirty five-dollar bills. This was proof to us that Caleb hadn't left town. For certainly, we reasoned, he wouldn't have gone away without his money, or without locking it up.

But to make sure that the vanished one was still in town we went to the depot where we inquired of the ticket agent if the missing townsman had spent any of his money in the past two days for a railroad ticket. The agent shook his head. He hadn't seen anything of Caleb for a week, he said.

The Cap'n was all broken up at our failure to get track of the vanished one. He was unable now to cook his own meals or otherwise wait on himself. So it became our job to take care of him. When I explained to Mother at the supper table that my old friend wasn't feeling well and needed me at his store that night to wait on him she readily consented to the plan. And getting my pajamas I headed for down town.

Dusk came and I had seen nothing of my four chums. Still, I knew they would be in the alley later on. That was their plan. So I had no fear of the spy.

The clock struck nine; then nine-thirty. And

having helped the weary old man out of his clothes and into his nightshirt, I went to bed myself, on the sitting-room couch, settling in comfort for the night.

Suddenly I was awakened by a piercing scream.

"Jerry! Jerry! Hel-up! Hel-up!"

It was the Cap'n! And from the terror in his screaming voice I could imagine that he was being murdered in his bed.

To reach his bedroom I had to cross the sitting-room. There was a puddle of moonlight on the floor. I waded through it. My eyes picked out a cane. I got it, wrapping my fist around the small end. With its heavy gold head the cane made a swell club.

But I had no occasion to use it. For there was no one in the moonlit bedroom except the old man himself, who was now sitting up in the bed.

"Jerry! Jerry!" the terrified voice rang through the house.

I ran forward.

"Here I am," says I.

I could see a pair of wild eyes in the moonlight.

"Jerry, I saw it. It was right thar by the foot of the bed. An' it—it——"

Here the voice broke. There was a sudden dead silence. Gee-miny crickets! Maybe you

think I wasn't scared. I thought sure the old man was dead. And I was all alone with him!

"Cap'n!" says I, shaking him. "Cap'n! It's me—Jerry. *Cap'n!*" But he never moved!

Well, you can see what an awful situation it was for me. An "it" had scared the old man to death. And for all I knew to the contrary the "it," whatever it was—human or otherwise—might still be lurking in some dark corner of the house to get a crack at me.

I got a light first of all. Then I looked under the bed and in the clothes closet. Nothing oozed at me. In the conclusion of my search a groan came from the bed. I knew then that the old man was still alive. So I wet a towel and mopped his face as a quick way of bringing him back to his senses.

And right then I got a shock. I almost stared my eyes out, I guess. For there on the unconscious one's naked breast, visible to me in the "V" of the unbottoned nightshirt, was a tattooed black parrot.

Well, I stood there staring, as I say, my thoughts jumping up and down. And then the old man got his voice again.

"Jerry! Jerry! Hel-up! Hel-up!"

"Here I am," says I, bending over the bed.

"Jerry! I saw it. Jerry! Hel-up!"

I got Doc Leland on the telephone then. For I could see that something was out of kilter in the frightened one's head. He kept calling my name. Yet he didn't seem to realize that I was standing beside his bed.

I had urged Doc to come in a hurry. And when he got there I explained to him how I happened to be in the house. The Cap'n hadn't been feeling well, I said—his nerves had gone back on him. So, in friendly service, I had agreed to stay with him and wait on him.

The listener was puzzled at my story.

"Um. . . . He must 'a' had a bad dream."

I shivered.

"It was something worse than a dream, Doc."

"You think he actually saw somethin'?"

"I'll tell the world! Gosh, Doc, you should have heard him. I thought at first that he was being murdered. So I ran into his room. He was sitting up in bed. His eyes were crazy. 'Jerry! Jerry!' he screeched at me. 'I saw it!' "

"It," repeated Doc, holding me with his puzzled eyes.

"He said 'it.' But I don't know what he meant."

"It," says the other again, working his

thoughts. "Um. . . . Couldn't 'a' bin a man, or else he would 'a' said 'him' instead of 'it.' "

In the excitement my mind had been too jumpy to permit of clear thinking. But somehow I had held to the belief that the spy was at the bottom of the Cap'n's scare. Now I was more at sea than ever. For, as Doc had said, if the spy had been in the house, and the Cap'n had seen him, certainly the old man wouldn't have said he had seen "it."

I was completely bewildered. What was it that the frightened one had seen? What was the nature of the peril that had visited him in the dead of night? And, further, where had this "peril" vanished to?

It! Could it be that a ghost had wandered into the store? I shivered in the thought of it.

Doc was working on the unconscious man now.

"Poor piece of tattooin'," says he, pointing to the chest design. "Amatoor work. Ol' Caleb Obed's got the same kind of a Tom-fool thing tattooed on him."

Three black parrots! One on the chest of a dead sailor; another on the chest of a man who was strangely missing; the third on the chest of a man who had just had the wits scared out of him. And on top of all this a real black parrot—

a living parrot of weird secrets. No wonder I was befuddled in the mystery.

In the next hour the stricken man was removed from his store to the emergency rooms. He was a very sick man, Doc said. It would take a week or two for him to get back on his feet. And in the meantime he needed complete rest and careful nursing.

In all this excitement, to my wonder, I had heard nothing from my chums in the alley. And the fear now came to me that something had happened to them. So I hurried outside to find them. But they weren't there! Nor could I find any trace of their ropes.

Br-r-r-r! The dark alley gave me the creeps. And of no desire to stay alone in the store I lit out for home. If my chums were in trouble they would have to paddle their own canoe, I told myself. For the night had already given me more than my share of adventure.

It was two o'clock when Dad opened the front door for me. At sight of me he wanted to know if I had lost my mind in coming home at that hour. I told him that the Cap'n had been taken worse and had been removed to the hospital rooms. He asked me several sleepy questions. But I didn't tell him everything.

CHAPTER XVI

THE EMPTY GRAVE

My chums got me out of bed the following morning.

"We can't find Cap'n Tinkertop," says Scoop, excited. "His store's closed, too."

I told the others where the old man was.

"Why weren't you on guard in the alley last night?" says I, feeling a little bit sore toward them for not being on hand when I needed them.

Scoop laughed sheepishly.

"Jerry, I hate to admit it. But in a scrap last night the Strickers got the best of us."

"They locked us in a barn," says Red, "and kept us there till midnight."

"So that's where you were when I needed you, hey?"

"Did you need us?"

I told them my story. They were excited, I want to tell you. Poppy pressed me with eager questions. Had I heard anybody in the store?—had I noticed if any doors or windows were open?

—had I searched the store after Doc's arrival?—and was I *sure* about the tattooed parrot on the Cap'n's chest?

I couldn't answer "yes" to the first three questions, but I could, and did, to the last one. Not only was the chest design a black parrot, I declared, but it was a duplicate of the one in the dead sailor's picture.

"And moreover," says I, "old Caleb's got the same thing tattooed on him. For Doc told me so."

Visiting old Caleb's house that morning, in the hope of finding the old man there well and unharmed, we came upon a yardful of excited people. For some wag had started the story that the vanished man had committed suicide. And what led the neighbors to take stock in the story was the known fact that the old man himself, on Monday afternoon, had ordered a grave dug in the Tinkertop lot in the old Scotch cemetery. He had told the sexton, so it was said, that a body was being shipped to the lot owner for burial. But to date no body had been received at the local express office. And everybody in Caleb's end of town was now saying that the vanished man, in planning his intended suicide, had ordered the grave dug for himself!

We took no stock in this story. Caleb wasn't dead, we said. He was hiding. But *why* he was hiding, and where, was a complete mystery to us. Yet we believed that the black parrot was in some way associated with the old man's disappearance. And we further believed that if we could find him we undoubtedly would get the key to the mystery that surrounded the strange parrot.

Could it be, we then considered, that old Caleb had something to do with the Cap'n's scare? Was he creeping out of his hiding place nights, to some secret purpose? This was an exciting thought. And as we were convinced now that the Cap'n's store—the death parrot's home—was the center of the mystery that involved the unusual black bird, it became our decision to work in the store that night instead of in the alley.

Meeting us at the store at dusk, Poppy fixed five matches. I drew the long one, which made me the "Cap'n."

"What am I supposed to do?" says I, uneasy in my prominent part in the night's coming adventure.

"Your job," says the leader, grinning, "will be to get into the Cap'n's bed in a perfectly natural way and pretend that you're sound asleep."

"And then what?" says I.

"Something is trying to get the Cap'n. We know that. It was here last night. And who can say that it won't come back again to-night to finish its job?"

I shivered.

"It may grab me," says I.

"If it does," says Peg, laughing, "kiss it and kill it."

"I don't want to kiss it," says I, turning up my nose, "if it's old Caleb."

"I *hope,*" says Poppy, serious, "that it's the spy."

Scoop was puzzled.

"How can it be a man?" says he. "That would be a 'him,' as Jerry says, and not an 'it.' "

"Maybe it was a man dressed up like a ghost," says Peg.

"*Good* night!" says I, motioning for them to clear the track for me. "I'm going home."

But I was joking, of course. I hadn't the slightest intention of going home. Even if I was to have a very risky part in the night's coming adventure I was determined to stay and see the thing through.

Peg's last remark had given us something to think about. A ghost was an "it," all right. But

what could be old Caleb's object, or the spy's, in playing ghost in the Cap'n's bedroom? And, further, how had the "ghost" gotten into the store?

It seemed to me that the mystery became more confusing every minute. Instead of solving it step by step, as we had done in other detecting jobs, we were walking further and further into the darkness.

"Let me get this straight," says I to Poppy, when they talked of putting me to bed. "You say I'm to let you fix me up to look like the Cap'n, to make the whatever-it-is think that I'm the old gent himself. Is that correct?"

"You've got the right idea."

"And then what?"

"You're tucked into bed. See? The thing comes. It's after the Cap'n. Creeping up to the bed, it takes a peek at you. It thinks you're its victim. And then—"

"Hey!" says I, cutting him off. "I thought you said you were going to grab it before it grabbed me?"

He laughed.

"Don't worry, Jerry. We won't let it harm you."

"Just the same," says I, shivering, "I've had jobs I liked better."

First they ruffled my hair and powdered it with flour to make it white. Then they penciled "wrinkles" into my cheeks with a burnt match. A wad of chewing gum made a neat wart for the side of my nose. For chin whiskers I was given a whisk broom, held in place with a string tied to my ears. I was even made to get out of my clothes and dress my bare legs in the absent householder's long white nightshirt. A nightcap was the finishing touch, after which, having put me to bed with a great deal of joking attention, the four crooks stepped back to view the results of their dirty work.

"Hi, Cap," says Peg, saluting.

"If you b'ys don't quit pesterin' me," says I, mimicking the old man, "I'll run you out of here on the end of my peg-laig."

Poppy grinned.

"Jerry," says he, "you ought to go on the stage. For you're a born mimic. Honest. Why, you sound more like the Cap'n, and look more like him, than the old man himself."

"If I don't look like a corpse before the night is over," says I, "I'll consider myself lucky."

When told to get into a hiding place in the

room Red parked himself behind the dresser. At Poppy's orders Peg and Scoop wedged themselves into the clothes closet. The fourth one flattened himself pancake fashion under the bed.

"Now," says the leader, turning out his flashlight, "let's have silence and lots of it."

My heart started to thumping in the sudden darkness. And detecting a slight noise in the alley I quickly turned my eyes to the window. Was it the spy? Or was it a ghost?

The alley sounds dying away into a deep silence, I started breathing again.

"If you fellows keep me here very long," says I, shivering, "I'll be a nervous wreck."

"Sh-h-h-h-h!" says Poppy.

"Why don't one of you get in bed with me?"

"You poor fish!"

"You can pretend that you're my wife. See? We'll hang a sign on the foot of the bed saying that we're newly married. So the ghost won't be surprised when it sees you here."

"Keep still, I tell you."

I saw a chance to have some fun. And reaching for my clothes beside the bed I searched the pockets for my ventrilo.

"B-b-blood!" says I, in imitation of the death parrot. "Gu-gu-give me a bucket of b-b-blood!"

"You aren't funny," says Poppy.

"I killed H-h-ham!" says I, in further fun. "I b-b-bit a hunk out of his liver and v-v-voodooed him."

"I'll come up there," says Poppy, "and bite a hunk out of your liver if you don't dry up."

"B-b-blood!" says I. "Gu-gu-give me a bucket of b-b-blood!"

"B-b-blood!" came the echo from under the bed, only Poppy said it so faintly and so muffled-like that I hardly caught the word.

"Golly Ned!" says I. "You can do it better than I can."

"Do what?" says he.

"My, but you're innocent!"

"I didn't do anything. Honest."

"Some one said, 'B-b-blood!' "

"It was you."

"It wasn't either. It was *you.*"

"All right," says he, "have it your own way. I'll agree to anything you say if you'll just shut up."

I had been told by the leader that I could actually go to sleep if I wanted to, instead of pretending. But you can bet your Sunday shirt that I had no intention of doing that. Not so you can notice it!

Everything was deadly still now. And in the continued silence my mind picked up the voodoo story. In imagination I saw the temple from which the death parrot had been stolen by the two sailors. I could see the building's woven grass walls and thatched roof. At the altar, where a fire was sputtering and snapping, was the parrot in its glittering cage. The smoke from the altar fire had a stinking smell. It made me think of Red's sweaty feet. Half awake and half asleep I got my chum's feet mixed up with the parrot. A pair of feet in a gold cage! What a funny sight! And where was the parrot? Oh, yes, it had been stolen. I could see a jungle now . . . a drifting raft . . . a coral island . . . a dead man . . . glassy, staring eyes . . .

Ker-*choo-o-o-o!*

Golly Ned! A gunshot directly in my ear couldn't have startled me any worse than the sneeze that came out from under the bed.

"For the love of mud!" says I. "Why don't you kill a guy outright instead of scaring him half to death?"

"Keep still," says Poppy.

"Yah," snickered the closet, "if you don't quit talking you'll loosen your chin whiskers."

Here the dresser came to life.

"Now what?" says Poppy, in disgust.

"I can't find my club."

"You and your club! We ought to use it on your head."

The dresser pranced around.

"For the love of Pete!"

"I've got to find my club."

"Why don't you knock the house down?"

"Did I make any noise?"

"Oh, no!"

"I'm awfully cramped in here."

"Come and get in bed with me," says I quickly.

"Stay where you are," says Poppy.

Dong! . . . dong! . . . gurgled the sitting-room clock in eleven mouthfuls.

"Now, fellows," says Poppy, earnestly, "let's get down to business and quit our nonsense. For this is a serious matter with me. Don't forget that Pa's in jail, and the only way I can get him out is by solving this mystery. So let's be quiet, as I say."

In the silence that followed I heard a young mosquito clatter up and down the window pane in search of human blood. Tick! tock! tick! tock! chattered the lively clock. Tick! tock! tick! tock! I nodded under the monotonous sound. Tick! tock! tick! tock! I nodded again.

Suddenly my dozing mind was jerked awake. Like a powder flash. Something soft and feathery had touched my bare feet. Under the covers. Gee-miny crickets! You can believe it or not, but I was out of that bed, sheets and all, in one jump.

"B-b-blood!" came a shrill stuttering voice. "B-b-blood! Gu-gu-give me a bucket of b-b-blood."

Getting my voice, I yipped at the top of my lungs.

"The parrot!" says I. "It's in the bed!"

My chums sprang to life. I heard the closet door fly open; and from the noise in the corner where the dresser was I could imagine that Red had turned that piece of furniture upside-down. Then there was another sound—a crash of broken glass.

Having dug me out of the mountain of bedclothes, my chums told me that the screaming parrot, in escaping from the room, had gone through the window pane.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE OLD MANSE

THE black parrot's crashing escape from the Cap'n's bedroom had left us dumb and dizzy. In planning our night's work we hadn't expected any such developments as this. In fact, we hadn't thought of the missing parrot at all. Certainly, it never had occurred to us that the parrot was in any way connected with its master's scare. We had thought of almost everything else *but* the parrot.

Our first scattered conclusion was that the mysterious bird was indeed possessed of uncanny powers and could thereby come and go of its own free will. But we quickly got away from that crazy belief. The bird hadn't gotten into the bed of its own accord, we sensibly agreed. Some one had put it there.

But to what purpose? Yes, *why* had the parrot been hidden in the bed? Had the Cap'n been secretly marked for death, like the old seadog in

Treasure Island? And granting that either old Caleb or the unknown spy was back of the evil scheme, was it the belief of these two men, or one of them, that the black parrot would fatally voodoo its master when he got into bed?

I shivered at the thought of it.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" says Peg, watching me.

"That was some narrow escape for me," says I.

"Fishhooks!" says he, laughing.

"I suppose," says I, stiffening, "that *you* would have let the parrot bite your leg off, hey?"

"Why not?" says he.

I didn't say any more to him then. I wasn't going to let him think that I believed the voodoo story if he didn't. But just the same I watched my chance and gave my bare legs a careful once-over. And I'll tell you truthfully that it was a big relief to me to find that the parrot hadn't drawn blood on me with its bill. Now I was safe. Whether the voodoo story was true or not I had nothing to fear.

"It," says Poppy, thinking. "We thought the Cap'n's 'it' was a ghost. But now we know it was the black parrot."

"We *think* it was the parrot," says I.

"There's no doubt about it in my mind."

"But why didn't the old man say 'parrot' instead of 'it'?"

"I can't answer that question any more than I can answer a dozen others concerned in the mystery."

"And don't forget," says I, "that he said he had seen 'it' at the foot of the bed—he didn't say 'it' was *in* the bed."

"What puzzles me," Scoop spoke up, "is who brought the parrot here. If there's crooked work going on, I can't make myself believe that old Caleb is at the bottom of it. For we know how thick he is with the Cap'n. And in close friendship like that he wouldn't be likely to scheme against the other one."

Poppy had been listening attentively.

"Sometimes," says he, "a good man is *made* to do evil things."

"What do you mean?"

"Old Caleb may be a helpless tool of the other man."

"The spy?"

"Sure thing."

"Aw! . . ." says Scoop. "I'd sooner think the spy was working alone."

"It gets my goat," says Poppy, after a moment, "that we can't capture this man. We've been

close to him—we've even seen him in the dark—yet he always gets away from us. He could belong in the moon for all we know about him."

"Don't let that worry you," says Peg. "For we're going to get him in the end."

"Yes," says Poppy, sort of dogged-like, "we've *got* to capture him. We've got to do that in order to clear Pa's name."

Scoop had gone to the broken window.

"To-morrow," says he, wanting to do the square thing by our old friend, "we'll all chip in and buy the Cap'n a new window glass. For we're sort of responsible for this accident."

We took turns standing guard throughout the balance of the night. But nothing happened. And at seven o'clock we went home to breakfast.

While we were replacing the broken glass that morning the Stricker gang meandered into sight.

"Window washers," says Bid, getting a wrong idea of our work.

"Flunkies," says Jimmy Stricker, turning up his nose at us.

"Cap'n Tinkertop's pets," says another one of the smart Alecks.

Bid got real brave and put a foot into the alley.

"Hello, Poppy," says he. "Did you have a nice time in the barn the other night?"

"We picked out a barn for you," says Jimmy, "because we thought you were a donkey."

"Hee-haw! Hee-haw!" says Bid. Then he came closer. "Say," says he, in pretended earnestness, "do any of you guys with strong backs and weak minds know where I can borrow a good wheelbarrow?"

He thought that was funny!

"Beat it," says Poppy, "or I'll tip this store building over on top of you and sprain your good looks."

"Go on, you tramp! You couldn't tip a mosquito over."

"I bet you anything you want to bet," says I, sticking up for our new leader, "that he can tip *you* over with one hand."

"Him? Don't make me laugh. I might crack my face."

"If you did crack it," says Scoop, "you wouldn't lose anything out of your head except water."

"You guys are a bag of wind."

"You'll think we're a cyclone," says I, "when we open up on you some day."

"Talk's cheap."

"If you haven't any other engagements this afternoon," says Poppy, "come around and we'll measure you up for a grave in our private cemetery."

Bid put out his chest then and raised his arm muscles.

"When *I* came to this town to live," says he, strutting, "they had to put an addition on the hospital."

"Yah," says Scoop, "I saw that room. It's padded on the inside and has your name over the door."

"Watch me spit! Every time I do it I crack the sidewalk."

"That's nothing," says Peg. "One time I sneezed and blew the North Pole over."

There was more of this crazy bragging talk. Both sides enjoyed it. But I got mad as hops, let me tell you, when one of the smart Alecks plastered me with a mud ball.

Chasing the kid out of the alley with a club, I came back to my chums fighting mad.

"Why do we always let them get the best of us?" says I, wiping my muddy face. "Why don't we clean up on them?"

Poppy grinned.

"Hold your horses, Jerry. Our time's coming."

"Yah, and so is the end of the world—but I don't expect to live to see it."

"We're going to fix them to-night. Eh, Scoop?"

"I'll tell the world we are!" says the old leader. "Remember what I told you the other night at the medicine show, Jerry?"

"About the Indian's 'spirit letter' trick?"

"Sure thing. Well, Poppy and I have it all framed up to work the letter trick on them to-night. Spider Phelps is going to help us. We need a man on our side. And we can trust Spider, for he's my cousin."

I gave a tickled yip when the complete scheme was unfolded to me. The fun we were going to have! Oh, boy! A mud ball, or a dozen mud balls, wasn't one, two, three as compared with what the Strickers were going to get.

However, I lost some of my enthusiasm that noon. For I overheard something at the dinner table that upset me.

Mother had a lot to say during the meal. She had been down town that morning, she told Dad, and had stopped at the emergency rooms to leave some pansies with a sick neighbor lady who recently had been repaired in the operating room.

"And while I was there I looked in on the Cap'n. Poor old man! He's still flighty. The nurse says he has the strange hallucination that old Caleb Obed has drowned himself in somebody's cistern."

Cistern! At the spoken word I suddenly pricked up my ears. And my thoughts jumped to Red.

"Tell me," says Mother across the table, "is there any truth in these stories that are going around about old Caleb ordering a grave dug for himself and then committing suicide in some out-of-the-way place?"

Dad shrugged.

"That's a queer thing," says he slowly. "Caleb ordered the grave dug, all right. I figure he's cuckoo."

"Has he actually disappeared?"

"As completely as if he had walked off the earth. I was talking with the marshal about the case, and Bill tells me that he has ransacked the town for the old coot without being able to find hide or hair of him."

Mother sighed.

"I hope the suicide story is untrue. For old Caleb was the best cistern cleaner we ever had."

"What's the matter with Negro Mose?"

"Oh, I can't exactly complain of his work. But I like old Caleb the best of the two. However, if the latter isn't available right now you had better hire Mose. For I think our cistern ought to be cleaned before a heavy rain comes."

"I'll see Mose on my way through town," says Dad.

Well, as you can imagine, I did some quick work getting over to Red's house.

"Your goose is cooked," says I.

"What do you mean?" says he.

"Old Mose is coming to our house this afternoon to clean our cistern."

That put a sick look on the other's freckled face. And while we were talking over the unhappy situation, wondering if there was anything that we could do to save ourselves, a fat woman bustled into sight with an armful of rugs.

"Sh-h-h-h!" says I. "Here's your Aunt Pansy, now."

"Don-ald," says the fat one, in a voice that was all honey and cream, "if you'll come here, like a dear little man, and shake these bedroom rugs for Aunty I'll make you a nice custard pudding for supper."

I beat it then. For it made me nervous to be around Red's aunt. And about two-thirty Poppy

and the others came to my house in a delivery wagon that they had borrowed from Scoop's store. Getting their signal, I ran into the street.

"Jump in, Jerry. Where's Red?"

I told them of the freckled one's predicament.

"He's a goner," says I. "For old Mose is bound to find his truck in the cistern."

"He sure was a dumb-bell," says Scoop, "to pull that burglar trick."

"And as long as he was doing it," says Peg, "why didn't he use his own cistern?"

"Search me," says I, shrugging. "But he'd be a lucky kid this minute if he had."

Here Scoop got his eyes on something down the street.

"It's going to rain, fellows," says he, laughing. "Look at the dark cloud coming."

The "dark cloud" was old Mose, a ladder draped on one shoulder and a coil of rope hung on the other. Each big hand gripped a pail handle.

I figured that it would be safer for me to be away from home when the silverware was brought up. So I quickly scrambled into the wagon, driving with the others to Peg's house where we got the "treasure chest," a sort of home-made trunk that his mother had dumped into the alley during

the spring housecleaning work. Made of heavy wood, with a thick hinged cover, iron handles and iron corner pieces, it was just the thing that we needed for our "buried treasure" trick. Scoop's father sells all kinds of cheap novelties in his store, and going there, our chum got four tiny red wheelbarrows.

Our truck gathered up, we then headed out of town on the Treebury pike. In Happy Hollow a familiar freckled face came into sight over the weeds beside the road.

"Hi," says Red Meyers, waving to us.

Poppy pulled on the lines.

"I thought you were home reënforcing the seat of your pants," says he.

"Where you headed for?"

"The old Scotch cemetery."

"Hot dog! You can give me a lift." Here the speaker bent over and tugged at something in the weeds. "Gosh, but this truck is heavy."

Say, you should have seen the bundle of stuff that he had! Kettles and pans and a baseball bat and a catching glove and bread and canned beans and I don't know what all.

"Are your folks moving?" says the leader.

"No, I'm running away."

"What?"

"I'm headed for Montana."

"Haw! haw! haw!" says Peg, in his rough way. "Why didn't you bring along the kitchen stove and the player piano?"

I couldn't believe at first that Red was in earnest about runnning away from home. Still, I reflected, it was just like him to start out this way with a wagon load of silly truck. He sure is rattleheaded.

There was a fearful clatter as the runaway pitched his frying pan and kettles into the wagon.

"Lookit!" says I, hooking a book. " 'Tricked at the Altar,' " I read.

"It belongs to Sis," says the sweating worker, shooing the flies off his hunk of boiled ham.

"Since when," says the grinning leader, as the runaway wedged himself into the seat with us, "did you get this grand and glorious idea of populating Montana?"

"Oh, it just came to me when I was flipping Aunt Pansy's rugs. So I grabbed my stuff and beat it."

"But what's the *idea?*"

"You ought to know."

"The silverware in the cistern?"

"That and the dead parrot."

"Aw! . . ." says Peg, serious. "You aren't

really going to run away from home to escape a licking, are you?"

"Nothing else but."

"Red, you're crazy. Why, kid, you won't get two miles from here before your folks catch you."

"I've got a scheme."

"Yah?"

"You know the old manse in the Scotch cemetery?"

"Where the sexton keeps the coffin cases?"

"Sure thing."

Peg glanced back at the "treasure chest" and quartet of toy wheelbarrows.

"We ought to know the place," says he, laughing, "for we're headed for there this very minute."

"I'm going to hide there," says the runaway. "For two or three weeks. Everybody will think I'm in Chicago or somewhere. See? They won't think of looking for me so close to home. Then, when the coast is clear, I'll make my getaway into the West." He unfolded his arms in a sweeping gesture. "Oh, you Montana!" says he. "The wild and woolly life for me. Injuns. Mountain lions. Gila monsters. Rattlesnakes."

Well, the rest of us fairly busted ourselves laughing at this silly talk. For it's a fact that Red

Meyers has about as little grit as any kid in Tutter. On a camping trip one time he found a spider in his pancake and was gaggy for a week. I had a picture of him living a "wild and woolly" life in Montana. Oh, yes! He didn't know a Gila monster from a camel's egg. As for chumming with rattlesnakes, if he thought there was one in the same county with him he'd shiver his back teeth loose.

But we let on to him that we swallowed his crazy talk. It was fun for us.

Coming to the cemetery in which Caleb Obed had so strangely ordered a grave dug, our eyes curiously sought the pile of fresh dirt. The grave, we noticed, was covered with a canvas to keep it dry in case of a sudden shower. Through the big pine trees in the background we could see the dilapidated old manse, the place that the four of us were heading for with our "treasure chest," and also the place where the runaway was intending to lay low until the way was clear for him to skin out for Montana.

A more direct course for us to have taken would have been through the big cemetery gate, but it was our scheme not to attract attention, so, passing the cemetery, we turned into a wood-lot road to the left. Winding here and there in this

unfrequented road, dodging low-hanging limbs, we presently drew up at the back door of the manse. Tying the horse to a fence, we first helped Red unload his truck, then, leaving the runaway to manage his own affairs, the four of us headed for the manse cellar with the chest and the four toy wheelbarrows.

In this windowless and doorless old building, a storage house for wooden coffin cases, the sexton kept his grave-digging tools. And helping ourselves to a pick and three shovels we quickly descended a flight of rotten wooden stairs into as damp and spooky a cellar as ever I had been in. Thinking of the near-by graves, I got a sudden case of cold shivers. But I quickly got over that feeling. For whatever idea I had of dead people coming back to earth it wasn't to be believed that a ghost or spook would be likely to meander into the manse cellar at this time of day. The time for ghosts to do their stuff was in the dark. I knew that.

Well, getting quickly to work, we marked off a spot three feet from one wall and six feet from another, sort of in a corner, and there we dug a hole in the dirt floor about four feet deep. The hole completed, we put the toy wheelbarrows into the chest, locked the cover with a rusted padlock,

and then dropped the box into the hole, covering it with dirt, flush with the floor.

Peg wiped his sweaty face.

"I'm glad that job's done," says he. "Wow! I'm wringing wet." He looked around at the shadowy corners. "Say, this is a spooky hole! A dozen black cats could hide down here and we'd never know it."

"Come on," says I, starting for the stairs. "Let's get out of here. I don't like the smell. It comes from the dead people on the other side of the wall."

Scoop sniffed.

"Um. . . ." says he. "It smells like a dead rat to me."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HAUNTED CISTERN

COMING out of the cellar, we found everything in the runaway's quarters in apple-pie order. To one side was a sort of provision shelf made of two long coffin cases piled one on top of the other. On another similar shelf the frying pan and kettles were neatly arranged. In the middle of the room was a sort of library table, built up of small coffin cases. Here we found the runaway hard at work copying a farewell letter to his folks from the book, "Tricked at the Altar."

"It wouldn't be right," says he, "for me to skip out to Montana without telling Ma something about my plans. For she might worry."

Peg, the big monkey, lugged in an iron cemetery settee. It brightened up the room, he said, and made it more homelike. Then he brought in a withered "Gates Ajar" flower piece that had been thrown away. There was nothing like having things cheerful, he said.

But the pencil pusher was too deep in his letter-writing job to give any attention to the nonsense that was going on around him. I looked in the book to see what he was copying. Here it is:

DEAR FATHER:

Unable to longer endure my unmerited shame, I am going to the river. It is my last earthly wish that my innocent child shall be brought up never to know the cruel trick that was played on its unfortunate mother at the altar. Good-by, forever. May I know a happier fate in the next world.

Your erring daughter,
TESSIE.

I let out a yip.

"For the love of Pete!" says I. "I hope *that* isn't the letter you're writing to your mother."

He glanced up.

"Oh, I'm changing it," says he. "How's this?"

DEAR MOTHER:

Unable to longer endure my shame in having killed Aunt Pansy's parrot, I am going to Montana to be a cowboy and scalp Indians and Gila monsters. It is my last earthly wish that you give Jerry Todd the custard pudding that Aunt Pansy promised to make for me for supper. He

will see that I get it and not eat it himself. Good-by, forever.

Your erring son,
DONALD.

P.S. Please give Jerry a spoon with the custard as I forgot to bring one along.

P.S. If you haven't got your spoons out of the cistern yet you needn't bother about sending me one. I can eat the custard without a spoon. But be sure and sugar it.

"Some kid, Red is," says Peg, when we were on our way home in the delivery wagon.

"Some bluffer, you mean," says Scoop, with a grunt.

I thought of the note that I was carrying to the runaway's mother.

"Maybe he means business," says I, thoughtful.

"*Him* run away?" says Peg, hooting at the idea. "Tell me next that the moon is made of green cheese and see if I believe *that.*"

Poppy laughed at his thoughts.

"After a night or two in the old manse he'll be glad enough to go home to Aunt Pansy and take his medicine."

"And what Aunt Pansy will do to him," says Peg, whistling. "Spat-spat-spat on his china end."

I squirmed at the turn of the conversation.

"Maybe," says I gloomily, "he isn't the only kid in Tutter who'll get a spat-spat-spat on his china end."

Coming into town, the others let me out of the wagon close to my home.

"Aren't you coming, too?" says I to Poppy.

He shook his head.

"I guess I better go down to the jail and see Pa. For he gets lonesome for me."

"We'll meet you after supper at the medicine show," says Scoop. "The invisible-ink letter is all written, telling about the wonderful buried treasure in the old manse cellar, and I've fixed it with Spider Phelps to hook one of the Indian's sheets to-night when they're passed out and switch it for mine. See? Then Spider's going to offer my sheet to Bid, who, of course, will jump at the chance of getting a 'spirit letter.'" There was a contented laugh. "And this is *some* letter, eh, Poppy?"

"I'll tell the world!" says the leader.

"I can imagine Bid's excitement when he reads it," says Scoop. "He'll show it to his gang, of course, for he won't have the nerve to go into the cemetery all alone. We'll have an eye on them. And when they start for the cemetery to dig up

the treasure we'll take a short-cut and get there ahead of them, hiding to see the fun. Red will be on the lookout for us. I told him not to show a light. And we're to give a 'mewing cat' signal, so he'll know for sure that it's us, and not the enemy."

I more than half suspected that Mother or Dad would be waiting for me at the front door with a paddle. So I didn't put on any speed in approaching the house. To the contrary I sort of piecemealed along.

But, to my surprise, the house was closed.

"Looking for your folks, Jerry?" says Mr. Dodson, who lives next door to us.

"Yes, sir," says I.

"The marshal was here this afternoon to see your pa about something. Then Mr. and Mrs. Meyers came over and they all drove away in the direction of Ashton."

Well, this was cheerful news!

Two hours passed and still my folks hadn't come home. But this didn't surprise me. The county courthouse is in Ashton. That is where the Tutter people go to get marriage licenses and dog tags. And now I had the feeling that my parents were at the courthouse trying hard to get a pardon for me. They undoubtedly believed me

"POLLY WANTS BREAKFAST!" CAME IN A WILTED HOLLOW VOICE FROM THE CISTERN.

Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot. *Page* 198

to be as guilty as Red. But even so they wouldn't want to see me go to jail. For I was just a boy. More than that I was *their* boy. And they loved me.

When dusk came I went down town. And who should I bump into, in turning a corner, but Bill Hadley himself. At sight of the marshal's big star I pretty nearly panaked.

"Kid," says the officer, putting a heavy hand on me, "I've bin lookin' fur you."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

"Lulu kept supper waitin' on you fur mor'n an hour," says Bill, naming his wife, an old school teacher of mine, as I say, and a chum of Mother's. "What's the idea of disappointin' us? Don't you like our grub? Or didn't you git your ma's note?"

"Note?" says I, dizzy.

"I was up to your house this afternoon talkin' with your pa about goin' fishin'. Then Mr. and Mrs. Meyers come over and started coaxin' your folks to go with them to some kind of a party in Ashton. Your ma said she didn't like to go away and leave you to git your own supper. 'Shucks,' says I, 'me an' Lulu we bin wantin' Jerry to come over to our house to supper fur a coon's age. You jest trot along,' says I, 'an' we'll take care

of Jerry an' see that he gits plenty to eat.' Your ma left a note fur you on the hall table. Didn't you find it?"

"No," says I, and I sort of felt myself over to make sure that I wasn't dreaming. I had expected him to drag me off to jail. And here he was talking to me like a chum!

Well, he took me into a restaurant and ordered some fried potatoes and beefsteak for me, with a lot of stuff on the side like apple pie with ice cream on it and two kinds of bread and dill pickles and fried cakes and jello and pears. There was pudding, too, and strawberry shortcake and some kind of a salad with chopped-up red peppers in it. Still dazed, I ate everything they set out. They brought me a second portion of meat and potatoes and I ate that. There was a big bowl of soup crackers near my plate and I ate that. I didn't leave a single cracker. As I look back the wonder to me is that I didn't eat the toothpicks or gnaw a hunk out of the wooden counter. With the law standing behind me, urging me on, eating seemed to be a sort of duty. So everything went down.

Bill was called away before I had the counter cleaned off. I was glad of that. He had talked to me like a friend, but I couldn't quite get away

from the worried feeling that I'd wake up and find myself in handcuffs. Besides I was having hard work now to get the food down. I didn't seem to have any room for it.

Staggering out of the restaurant, I bumped into Tommy Hegan, a neighbor kid.

"Golly Ned!" says he, laughing. "You sure did scare the wits out of old Mose this afternoon. He thinks your cistern is haunted. How did you work it, Jerry?"

I loosened my belt and drew a deep breath.

"Work it?" says I. "Work what?"

"The voice."

"What voice?"

"The voice in the cistern that said, 'Polly wants breakfast.' I laughed when Mose told me about it. He says he wouldn't go near your cistern again, to finish the job of cleaning it, for a hundred dollars. It was a pretty slick trick, all right. Tell me how you worked it, Jerry."

Red's parrot! I saw the whole thing in a flash. He had dumped the parrot into the cistern along with the other stuff. And instead of being dead, as we had supposed, the bird had been in a faint. And now it was recovered! And the law as yet hadn't found out about the silverware!

Boy, was I ever glad! Hoop-a-la! I kicked up

my heels, only I couldn't kick very high because my tight stomach was sort of in the way of my knees. Then down the street I went, lickety-cut, and into our back yard.

"Polly!" says I, putting my head into the black cistern. "Polly!"

"Breakfast," came a wilted hollow voice from the in-flow tile. "Polly wants breakfast."

The thing to do, I figured out quickly, was to tell Red that his parrot was alive and then help him get it out of the cistern. It would help our case if we could get the bird back into its cage before our folks returned from Ashton. And if we could succeed in bailing up the silverware so much the better.

I started for the cemetery on the run, telling myself that things were looking a lot brighter for us. And now comes the part of my story that always gives Mother the shivers.

CHAPTER XIX

VOODOOED

COMING to the dark cemetery, I paused to get my wind, my eyes anxiously seeking the path that I had to take among the tombstones in order to reach my chum. How weird the white shafts looked in the filtered light! They seemed to be crouching, listening. I shivered, dreading at the moment to enter the spooky place.

Then I got a grip on myself. It was only a person's fear of dark cemeteries, I told myself, that made such places dangerous. It wasn't the scheme of the dead to harm the living.

So, entering the cemetery in bolstered courage, I hurried along the gravel road, trying not to let myself believe that something was following me. But I kept looking back as a sort of precaution. I couldn't help it. Try going through a cemetery some dark night and see how *you* feel. Once a branch twisted under my foot and slapped me on the leg. Boy, did I ever jump!

The pines that I passed under were a hundred

years old. And there were tombstones in the cemetery fully as old as the trees. Once upon a time a Scottish church, called a kirk, had stood on this hill. A fire had wiped out the church. But the manse and the churchyard remained.

I had to pass close to the empty grave. And at sight of it queer thoughts crept into my mind. Had Caleb actually ordered it for his own use in strange foreboding of his early death? Had he been voodooed? Was he dead, as the Cap'n suspected?

"Dea-a-ad!" mournfully whispered the pines, picking up the thread of my thoughts. "Dea-a-ad! Dea-a-ad!"

Coming to the old manse, a black pile in the crowding darkness, I put my head in at the door.

"Red," says I, breathing my chum's name.

There was no answer. Remembering about the cat signal, I gave a loud, "Meow!" Still no response from within.

"Red," says I, louder. "It's me—Jerry. I've got some good news for you."

Lighting a match, I stepped, trembling, into the building, my eyes seeking a safe path. The frying pan and ham, I noticed, were on their respective coffin-case shelves. But of the runaway himself there was no sign.

"Red," says I again, raising my voice. *"Red."*

What I didn't know was that the "runaway" had gone home, like the big baby that he was at heart. His "Montana" talk was all a bluff. In sending the note home he had figured that his mother would make me tell her where her "erring son" was. Then, of course, mamma and Aunt Pansy, all flustered, would hurry around to the front door of the manse with the family sedan, begging Sonny, on bended knees, to please come home again and give up his intended scheme of scalping Indians and Gila monsters. In getting him back into the family circle their joy, of course, would be so great that they would forget all about wanting to punish him.

Oh, Red's tricky, all right! But what had sort of upset things for him was the unexpected absence of his folks. His mother being away, I had been unable to deliver his note, and consequently no one had come for him, as he had expected they would, with the willing promise that all would be forgiven. He had held out until sundown, and then, shaking, had lit out for home. Late that night his folks found him sound asleep on their back porch, the empty custard dish in his lap.

But, of course, I didn't know about the runa-

way's deceitful scheme until later on. And searching for him unsuccessfully in the old manse, I became terrified at the thought that something had happened to him.

"Red," says I in a trembling voice. And going to the doorway into the cellar I peered down the stairs. *"Red."*

The rotten stairs suddenly collapsing under my weight, I was pitched, screaming, into the dark, foul-smelling hole. Plaster and rubbish showered around me. Feeling about to get my bearings, my left hand suddenly touched something yielding. Like an inflated football. I froze in sudden horror. For I knew that the thing I had touched in the dark was no football, but *a dead man's face.*

I fumbled in my pocket for a match. Getting one, I struck it. The small blaze gave me a glimpse of a stretched-out form that had been hidden from our sight that afternoon by the stairs. As I had suspected, it was old Caleb Obed!

I hadn't believed the voodoo story in first hearing it—it was a crazy tale, I had said. But after the mysterious appearance of the black parrot in my bed I had been doing some thinking. And

now I knew the truth of the matter. There was no longer room for doubt. The parrot's story was only too true.

How I got out of that stairless hole I don't know. But I did get out, somehow. And, screaming, I ran out of the cemetery and down the road into town, where, completely forgetting about my promise to the Cap'n, I sounded the alarm of the tragedy in the street. When the story got to Bill Hadley's ears he loaded his flivver full of excited men and drove up the Happy Hollow road on the tear.

Realizing that Dad ought to know the truth about my part in the death parrot's escape, I ran home, still trembling, determined to tell my parents the whole story from beginning to end. For I realized that immediate steps should be taken to kill the weird parrot. Otherwise it might voodoo some one else. Every minute that it was permitted to live human lives were in danger.

Finding the house still in darkness, I switched on the lights. As I did so the clock struck ten. How queerly I felt! I suddenly noticed it. I worked my dizzy head on its rubbery support. Then I noticed a peculiar pain in my left foot.

Taking off my shoe and stocking, I found a

swollen ankle. The foot had been bleeding, too. There were matted drops on my big toe.

Puzzled at first to account for the injury, I suddenly remembered that *this* was the foot that had touched the voodoo parrot in the bed.

Say, if ever there was a scared kid in the whole history of the world it was *me*. The terrible thought jumped into my head that I had been voodooed. The parrot had nipped me in the bed without the slight injury showing at the time.

I tried hard to fight down my fears. I didn't want to believe that I had been voodooed. For, if I had, I would die. There were no "if's" and "and's" about that. The result of the voodoo was *death*. The Cap'n had said so, and Caleb Obed's death had proved it. The bare thought of it drove me out of my senses.

"Dad!" says I, running madly through the empty house. "Dad! Mother! Dad!"

But there was no one there to help me.

Then to my great joy the front door bell rang. In the hall my hand touched something cold . . . the marble-topped table. *Marble!* I shrank back in horror. For marble was what tombstones were made of.

"Good evening," bowed the man at the door, and I saw in added horror that he carried a bou-

quet of calla lilies. "I am a stranger in town. Can you direct me to the home of Mr. W. W. Graves?"

Graves! Calla lilies! I slammed the door shut in the stranger's face, for I could think of him only as an omen of death itself. Suddenly weak in the knees, I dropped, panting, into a seat in the hall. *Marble! Graves! Calla lilies!* The sweat ran down my cheeks.

The dizzy feeling was now in my crammed stomach. Everything that I had eaten for supper was going around and around. First the strawberry shortcake chased the dill pickles, then the jello played horse with the pepper salad. To vary the lively program, the pears and everything else lined up in a game of leapfrog.

I had turned on the parlor lights, wanting to drive away every particle of darkness. And there on the parlor wall within range of my eyes, nodding at me in the bright light, was my dead Grandfather Todd's picture. The eyes held a new expression. They seemed to be *beckoning* to me.

Was I crazy?

I ran out of the house. The shortcake now had a strangle hold on the jello's windpipe. The latter's death struggles grew fainter and fainter.

Then the beefsteak, galloping to the jello's rescue, kicked the shortcake in the seat of the pants and the fight started all over again.

I bumped into a man in the street.

"Howdy, Jerry," says Mr. Ump. My eyes bulged at sight of the long package under the sexton's arm. All I could think of was a new shovel.

Ten minutes later, having tripped on the sidewalk in front of Mr. Kaar's undertaking parlor, I tumbled into Doc Leland's office, where I faced six or seven surprised men, among them Bill Hadley and Scoop's father. A meeting of some kind was in progress. But the meeting broke up in a hurry, let me tell you, when I galloped into the room, capless, wearing only one shoe and stocking, yelling to Doc to get busy and save my life.

Springing up, Bill took my arms and drew my face close to his.

"Why, Jerry!" says he, searching my eyes. "What's the matter?" Then he laughed. "Have you found another 'dead man'?"

The whole story came out then—how we had let the death parrot escape and how it had voodooed Caleb Obed, killing him, and how I had been voodooed in the Cap'n's bed, and, in consequence, had been seeing graves with marble tops

and sextons carrying long-handled strawberry shortcakes trimmed with calla lilies.

"Um. . . ." grunted Doc, getting the hang of my wild story. "H'ist up that foot that's bin voodooed an' let me take a peek at it."

The men were laughing now. And I wondered at it.

"Um. . . ." says Doc, examining the inflamed ankle. "Bin swimmin' in the creek, hain't you?"

I nodded.

"P'ison ivy," says he, with a grunt. Thumping me in the stomach, he inquired what I had had for supper.

"Beefsteak and fried potatoes," says I, "and strawberry shortcake and pepper salad and dill pickles and jello and apple pie with ice cream on it and pears and——"

"That'll do," says Doc, and he acted as though he was sort of disgusted with me. I guess he had the idea that I had been eating too much. I was beginning to think so myself.

Bill was laughing his head off now.

"Why, kid," says he, patting me on the back to brace me up, "you hain't bin voodooed. That fall of your'n into the cemetery cellar upset your nerves. You've bin lettin' yourself imagine things."

Mr. Ellery winked at Doc.

"I think," says he, laughing, "that the boy's stomach has been upset worse than his nerves."

"Old Caleb hain't dead, Jerry," Bill went on. "You thought he was. But he hain't. We brought him home a few minutes ago. He's drunk, that's all."

I was still dizzy.

"And he wasn't voodooed?" says I.

Bill laughed and gave me another friendly pat on the back.

"Kid," says he, "you're funny."

CHAPTER XX

WHAT WE CAPTURED

Doc Leland had me lay down on a couch in his office while he doped my ankle with medicine.

"Um. . . ." says he, in the course of his work. "How does that feel?"

"It stings," says I, fidgeting.

"Of course it does. But that hain't a-goin' to kill you."

I was told then that I would be all right again in a few days, but I wasn't to do any more swimming in the creek. For the sluggish stream was full of poison, Doc said.

The meeting was going on in the room. And from the earnest conversation of the business men I gathered that they were up in arms over old Caleb's spree. It was a disgrace to the community, Mr. Ellery declared.

"I've got a boy growing up," says he, meaning Scoop, "and if I am to expect him to properly respect his country's laws, and abide by them, I've got to do my part, as a parent and citizen, and

you fathers have got to do the same, to see that the laws are obeyed. In short, gentlemen, we've got to set our growing boys a good example in law enforcement and cease this milk-and-water attitude of ours toward a vicious traffic that we know exists in our midst. That is why I suggested this informal meeting."

"I have said right along," says Mr. Fisher of the Chamber of Commerce, nodding in approval of Mr. Ellery's speech, "that we could stop the moonshine traffic if we got together."

Bill's face reddened.

"Is that an insinuation, Fisher, that I hain't bin doin' my duty?"

"Not at all," says Mr. Ellery quickly. "We didn't get together to-night to criticize anybody but ourselves. The point is, as I see it, that we, as a community, have been entirely too lackadaisical in our support of our officer."

"Until lately," says Bill, "we hain't had an awful sight of 'moon' in town. As fur old Caleb's case, I've got a' idear who sold him the stuff. But if we were to raid the guy I doubt if we'd git any evidence. Fur them fellers is reg'lar snakes in coverin' up their tracks."

"Who is this bootlegger?" says Mr. Fisher.

Bill gave a name that surprised and excited me.

"Why! . . ." says I, drawing the attention of the men to my couch. "Maybe this bootlegger is the burglar."

There was a moment's dead silence.

"By gum," says Bill, giving me a warm look, "I never thought of *that.*"

Doc's office adjoins the emergency rooms. And at this point the public health nurse tapped on the connecting door and entered.

"I thought you might want to know," says she to Doc, "that Cap'n Tinkertop has partially regained his senses. He tells a queer story about a ghost—as I understand it, the ghost of a dead sailor brother. It might quiet him if you were to talk with him."

"Um. . . ." says Doc. "So he's got somethin' to tell us about a ghost, has he? That must 'a' bin the 'it' that he seen night before last."

Here the Cap'n himself pottered into the room, having gotten out of bed of his own accord.

"Caleb," says he huskily, searching the room with restless troubled eyes. "Caleb. Hais any of you gentlemen seed anything of ol' Caleb Obed? I've bin lookin' fur him. But I kain't find him."

Doc got the trembling patient safely into a chair.

"Saturday," says the old man, mumbling to himself. "Ham said—I was to give him—the money—on Saturday night. Ham said——"

"He's talking about his brother," says I to Doc.

"But his brother's dead."

The old man's ears caught this.

"Yes," says he, nodding slowly, "my brother's daid. Ham, I mean. But he come back. He allus said he would, an' he did." Again the troubled eyes searched the room, as though the muddled brain was seeking a way out of its confusion. "Don't you un'erstand? It was his *ghost* that I seed—his *spirit*. I woke up sudden. An' thar he was at the foot of the bed. An' he said—he said—I was to give him back—his money. He said—I haid lost his par'ot—I haidn't kep' my part of the 'greement—an' I was to give him back his money—on Saturday night."

Mr. Ellery had been listening attentively.

"What money is he talking about, Jerry?"

I explained about the insurance money.

The merchant gave a dry laugh.

"I never was quite foolish enough to believe in ghosts," says he, "and particularly am I unwilling to take stock in a ghost that tries to collect its own insurance money." He paused in deep

thought. "I wonder," he went on, "if we aren't in touch with some kind of a scheme to defraud the insurance company that carried the two-thousand-dollar policy. To that point, this man Ham may not be dead at all. He may have faked a death, scheming to recover the insurance money in trickery from his not overly bright brother."

Bill was grim now.

"I'm beginnin' to think," says he, waggling, "that they is some close connection between this bootlegger an' the Cap'n's ghost. Fur, as Jerry says, the robberies followed this feller's appearance in town, so why not this other trick, too? Anyway, this bein' Saturday night, we'll jest do a little investigatin' in that quarter." Pausing, he looked at me and laughed in his rough way. "How would you like to git in the Cap'n's bed ag'in, Jerry?"

"Nothin' doin'," says I, shivering.

"No? Well, calc'late we'll have to use Fisher then. Fur he's jest about the Cap'n's size. Come on, men."

"I'm going, too," says I, jumping up.

I looked for my chums in the street, but to my disappointment they were nowhere in sight. Presently we turned the corner into School Street. In the Cap'n's store Mr. Fisher got into the old

man's bed, as I had done the preceding night, while the other men distributed themselves throughout the store in good hiding places. I was in the bedroom closet with Bill. And, boy, maybe you think I wasn't excited!

There was a long wait. At least it seemed like an age to me. I heard the sitting-room clock strike eleven; then eleven-thirty.

Suddenly a hand pressed mine in the dark.

"There!" says Bill, breathing the word in my ear.

I had heard the sound, too—some one, or *something,* was on the roof. Yet I had to stretch my ears to detect the light, muffled footsteps. We heard the scuttle open. There were parrot-like footfalls in the attic. Then the trapdoor in the sitting-room ceiling was drawn up. Following a short, deep silence, a rope fell with a slight thud to the floor. To a deep sleeper all of these sounds would have passed unnoticed.

We had left a lamp burning low in the room. And through the crack in the closet door I now saw the dead sailor's "ghost" approach the foot of the bed, white-faced, its eyes staring and glassy, its breast bared to show the tattooing. At this point the bed creaked slightly. Afterwards the men joked Mr. Fisher, accusing him of shivering.

And to that point maybe he did shiver. It wouldn't have been so very surprising. Even with my hand in Bill's I sort of shivered myself.

"B-b-boaz Tinkertop," stuttered the ghost, in a graveyard voice, "you have lost my p-p-parrot. You have let it fall into e-e-evil hands. So, having broken your s-s-solemn promise to me, I d-d-demand my money back. *Give me my m-m-money!*"

Here Bill threw open the closet door and flashed his gun.

"Hands up!" he roared, which was a signal for the other men to tumble into the room.

Well, my story really ends with the "ghost's" capture. As you probably have guessed, the "ghost" was the Indian medicine man. But the captured one was no real Indian—he was a younger black-sheep brother of the Cap'n's, a man long since disowned by his two older law-abiding brothers. At one time he had been a character actor in an Indian play, which explains how the "Indian" idea had become fixed in his head. Of a naturally tricky mind, traveling around the country in his later years in Indian disguise selling fake medicine publicly and moonshine secretly was stuff to his liking.

Angered in getting no lawful share of his oldest

brother's life insurance money, he had thought up the scheme of stealing the death parrot from its new owner and playing "ghost," knowing how very superstitious the Cap'n was. It was to find out where the black parrot was hidden in the store that he had spied through the alley windows. Fortunate for his evil purpose he had seen us take the strange parrot out of its wall hole, as I have written down. That was on Monday night —his first night in town. On Tuesday night he had robbed the brickyard safe. Having found in old Caleb a steady customer for his moonshine, he had gone to the old bachelor's home late Wednesday night, hoping to sell still more liquor. In the open house he had seen the stuffed black parrot, and, stealing it in a queer turn of humor, had directly afterwards switched it for the sooted parrot. In stealing the live parrot that night he had thought, of course, that he was getting possession of Solomon Grundy. Later that same night he had robbed the Meyers' home. And how the sooted parrot got away from him there you already know.

To-day as a result of his evil life he is in jail. The money that he stole from the brickyard safe was recovered, and out of the three thousand dollars we got five hundred dollars. Dad groaned

in paying us this big amount of money. But he had promised us one hundred dollars apiece if we captured the burglar, so he had to keep his word.

Poppy rented a home on Elm Street with his share of the money and stocked the house with stuff to eat. He bought some second-hand furniture, too. However, he didn't have to buy very much furniture, for our folks gave him a lot of stuff. Mr. Ott, of course, was freed, but I really think he was sorry to leave his comfortable cell. Strange to say a warm friendship had sprung up between the old man and Bill. And to-day these two men get together and talk "detective" stuff by the hour. Poppy says, though, that his father, now a regular employee of Dad's, has given up all hope of ever being a successful sleuth.

A rough man, Ham Tinkertop had taught his weird parrot its "blood" talk. And it was the sailor, tattooed himself, who had tattooed his two brothers and old Caleb. There was no mystery in the tattooing on the Cap'n's and old Caleb's breasts, nor was there any mystery in the dead sailor's odd picture. As for the new grave, it was generally concluded that old Caleb had been drinking when he had ordered the grave dug. I am glad to write down in conclusion that we got

the old man to sign a temperance pledge. And he has kept his word, too. To-day he hates the filthy stuff. I wish all men hated it. For, as Dad says, moonshine is poison. And the thing for a fellow to do, if he has any pride in himself, is to leave it alone. Bu-lieve me, I'm never going to act smart when *I* grow up and drink any of the rotten stuff.

If Mrs. Strange ever got track of her stolen mino bird I never heard about it. It wasn't her dead bird that old Caleb had. I sometimes think it was a lucky thing for me that her bird was stolen. For it was through the bird's theft that Poppy came to our town to live. I sure do like that kid. I never expect to have a pal that I like any better. And he feels the same way toward me. It's bully to have a pal like that. So, as I say, I can't feel sorry that the Cedarburg woman's bird was stolen. What was her loss was my gain.

Able again to take care of his bird business, the Cap'n confessed to us one morning that in his fear of the death parrot he had secretly advertised the bird for sale. He knew he was doing wrong. His conscience had hurt him, he said. And this probably explains why he had been so

terror stricken when the dead man's accusing "ghost" came.

That same week we captured Solomon Grundy in Bid Stricker's hen house. Bid himself had earlier caught the bird, and, in an intended trick on the parrot dealer (he had found out somehow that the Cap'n had lost a black parrot), had put the bird in the old man's bed, not knowing that the storekeeper had been taken to the emergency rooms. The enemy chief kept out of our sight while we were in his yard. He has given us a wide berth ever since his recent "adventure" in digging up a certain "buried treasure" consisting of four five-cent toy wheelbarrows!

Oh, yes, in conclusion I must tell you about poor Red. I slipped into his yard the Monday after Bart Tinkertop's arrest, and there sat funny-face on the back porch steps polishing silverware to beat the cars. He had a cushion under him. His aunt was on the porch feeding crackers to her half-starved parrot. And when I meandered around the corner of the house she looked at me as though I was some miserable thing that the cat had dragged in. So I promptly meandered back home again.

I don't like that woman!

And that is all for this time. In another book, POPPY OTT'S SEVEN-LEAGUE STILTS, I will tell you how my new chum and I went into business and made considerable money. Boy, did we ever have fun! A smart rich kid who thought he was better than us tried to kick our business in the seat of the pants. But, bu-lieve me, *he* got a kick in the seat of the pants before we got through with him. The things Poppy did, with my help, make a mighty interesting story, I think. There is a strange old man in this new book. Br-r-r-r! Through him we became entangled in a most amazing and most bewildering mystery. Talk about a shivery adventure! If *you* don't shiver when you read this new book, the title of which I have given above, I'll miss my guess.

THE END

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